ROYAL NAVY FORCE H 1940–42

Britain's strike force at Gibraltar

Angus Konstam
Illustrated by Paul Wright

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CONTENTS

THE FLEET'S PURPOSE

- The Mission

FLEET FIGHTING POWER

- The Ships
- Technology

HOW THE FLEET OPERATED

- Command and Organization
- Intelligence and Communication
- Logistics and Facilities

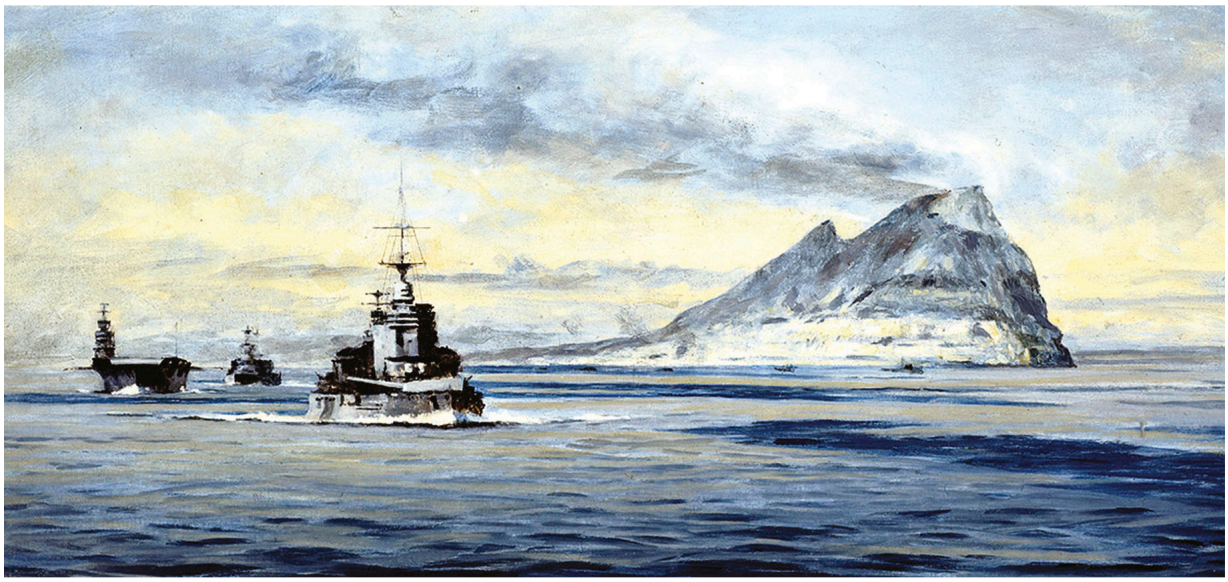
COMBAT AND ANALYSIS

- The Fleet in Combat
- Analysis

FURTHER READING

THE FLEET'S PURPOSE

'Force H' was a Royal Naval task force based in Gibraltar, which operated independently of any larger fleet. Instead, the task force commander, the highly gifted V. Adm. Sir James Somerville, took his orders directly from the British Admiralty. Although it had no official area of operations, by being based in Gibraltar, Force H was uniquely positioned to operate in both the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea. It was created in the summer of 1940, less than three weeks after Italy's entry into the war. This was a critical time, as the fall of France just a few days before had completely altered the strategic situation. The powerful French fleet was no longer a useful ally, and worse, it was now in danger of being used to support the enemy. So, Force H was largely created to replace the loss of the French fleet to the Allied cause, and to counter any offensive moves made by the Italians.



Force H putting to sea from Gibraltar in 1941, in this copy of a painting by Rowan Langsmaid, a war artist attached to Adm. Cunningham's staff. In this depiction, Somerville's flagship HMS *Renown* leads out the carrier HMS *Ark Royal* and the cruiser HMS *Sheffield*, while destroyers guard the flanks of the larger warships.

Despite extensive diplomatic efforts to avoid confrontation, Somerville was given the deeply unpleasant task of neutralizing the French fleet at Mers-el-Kébir in French Morocco. On 3 July, after a brief but violent action, this had been achieved, albeit at the cost of almost 1,300 French lives. However, the Vichy French fleet was no longer a threat which could tilt the naval balance irrevocably in favour of the enemy. After this, Force H remained the arbiter of naval power in the Western Mediterranean, while being able to play its part in the Atlantic too. Essentially, Force H was a free-ranging squadron, a sort of naval fire brigade, which the Admiralty could send wherever it was needed the most.

For a year after Mers-el-Kébir, Force H divided its time between the Atlantic and the Mediterranean. Its most famous foray into the Atlantic involved hunting down the German battleship *Bismarck*, but it was also kept busy pursuing German ocean raiders and dealing with the Vichy French naval squadron based at Dakar. Increasingly though, the focus shifted to the Western Mediterranean. There, escorting eastward-bound convoys and carrying out 'Club Runs' – the sending of fighters to Malta – were interspersed with a raid on Genoa and a clash with the Italian battlefleet off Sardinia. By mid-1941 the support of Malta Convoys had become strategically vital, and Force H played a key role in these hard-fought operations, which were of critical importance to Allied fortunes in the Mediterranean. This then, is the story of this unique naval formation, which had the strategic flexibility and the firepower to shape the course of the naval war in not just one but two vital theatres.

THE MISSION

On 10 May the German army launched *Fall Gelb* ('Case Yellow'), the invasion of France and the Low Countries of Belgium, Luxembourg and the Netherlands. The German armoured thrust through the Ardennes caught the

Allies by surprise, and as the British army advanced into Belgium to the north, the German spearhead crossed the River Meuse near Sedan, and pressed on to the west, heading towards the English Channel. The leading German units reached the coast on 20 May, cutting the Allied armies in two. With a military disaster looming, the British government called upon the Royal Navy to plan for the evacuation of Allied troops from Dunkirk. Six days later, on the evening of 26 May, this plan, Operation *Dynamo*, was put into effect.

As the remaining French troops grimly held the perimeter around Dunkirk, the evacuation continued, in the face of heavy German air attacks. However, by the night of 4/5 June, when the evacuation ended, over 338,000 British and French troops had been spirited away to safety across the Channel. By then though, the Germans had begun the next phase of their offensive. *Fall Rot* ('Case Red'). The conquest of France began on 5 June, and the outnumbered French were unable to stop the German advance from the River Somme to the River Seine. Paris fell nine days later on 14 June, and the French government fled to the south. On 16 June, the French prime minister resigned and was replaced by the old war veteran Marshal Pétain, who immediately sought an armistice. This armistice was duly signed, and came into effect just after noon on 25 June. From that moment on, Britain stood alone against Nazi Germany, and its new-found ally.

That ally was Mussolini's Italy. As if the strategic situation wasn't bad enough after Dunkirk, on the evening of 10 June, as the Germans approached Paris, Italy declared war against Britain and France. Until then, apart from playing its part in the evacuation from Dunkirk, the Royal Navy had been on the sidelines of the battle for France. Now though, Italy's entry into the war meant that with almost no warning, the British Mediterranean Fleet found itself pitched into a naval campaign against the powerful *Regia Marina* (Royal Italian Navy). Adm. Cunningham's fleet was based at Malta, just a few minutes' flying time from Italian air bases in Sicily. On 11 June, the day after Italy's declaration of war, the *Regia Aeronautica* (Royal Italian Air Force) bombed Malta. The wholly inadequate air defences of the island did what they could, but were unable to stop this bombing raid, or those that followed. These bombing raids would continue for almost two and a half years, and Malta's capital of Valetta was reduced to rubble.

The Mediterranean Fleet though, was able to escape the worst of it. Before Italy entered the war, the bulk of the fleet had moved east to Alexandria, which became its new base. Reinforcements had also been sent to join the fleet, and Cunningham was sanguine that with French help, he would be able to deal with the Italian battle fleet. However, he was unable to influence the rapidly changing situation in France. According to the terms of the armistice, France was divided into an occupied zone and a 'free zone', both of which were officially administered by the French government in Vichy. The occupied zone included France's Atlantic coast, and the ports of Brest, Lorient, Saint-Nazaire, La Rochelle and Bordeaux, which the *Kriegsmarine* (German navy) quickly turned into U-boat bases. While operating from Germany's North Sea coast, they faced a long and dangerous transit to their Atlantic hunting grounds. Now instead, they were poised on the edge of this ocean, within easy reach of Britain's transatlantic shipping lanes.

Vichy France itself represented a major naval threat. The bulk of the French Navy (*Marine Française*) was based at Toulon on the French Mediterranean coast, or in ports in French North Africa. Despite French assurances that the fleet would stay out of German or Italian hands, both the British government and the Admiralty feared that this wouldn't be possible. If it did join the navies of the two Axis powers, then the Royal Navy would almost certainly lose control of the Mediterranean. Towards the end of June 1940, the strategic situation facing Britain was bleak. In the space of a few dramatic weeks, it had changed almost beyond recognition. With the *Kriegsmarine* establishing bases on the English Channel and France's Atlantic seaboard, and its U-boats within easy reach of Britain's sea lanes, the Royal Navy faced a new and very immediate danger in home waters. The entry of Italy into the war now made the Mediterranean a key naval theatre as well.

In June 1940, when Italy entered the war, Malta came under air attack, an aerial bombardment that would continue well into 1942. So, from November 1940 on, Force H was kept busy carrying out Club Runs to bolster RAF Malta, or else supporting convoys to the beleaguered island, where food, supplies and the means to continue fighting were in increasingly short supply.

The withdrawal of the British Mediterranean Fleet to Alexandria left a vacuum in the Western Mediterranean. Although Britain maintained a powerful naval base at Gibraltar, guarding the strait linking the Mediterranean to the Atlantic, there were too few warships there to do little more than guard the Strait of Gibraltar. By moving from Malta to Alexandria, the Royal Navy had effectively abandoned the Western and Central Mediterranean. As if the threat posed by the *Regia Marina* wasn't enough, there was the French fleet to consider. Having rejected all British proposals to neutralize the fleet, it remained a latent threat, just a few hours steam from Gibraltar. The Admiralty though, had a solution to alleviate some of this strategic pressure.

In the middle of June 1940, the Admiralty had three pressing challenges. They were all created by the dramatic fall of France. The first was to fill the vacuum in the Western Mediterranean created by the loss of the French fleet to the Allied cause. The second was the need to monitor the French naval

forces stationed in French North Africa (Algeria and Morocco) and French West Africa (now Senegal), as well as what remained of the French fleet based at Toulon. The third problem centred around how to prevent the enemy getting their hands on these French warships and adding them to their own fleets. After considering various options, the Admiralty finally decided to create a powerful naval force which would be based at Gibraltar. This would be able to operate in the Western Mediterranean, and also venture into the Atlantic, to protect the convoy route between Sierra Leone and Gibraltar. This force would also carry out other missions as and when they were required.

As a result, 'Force H' was formally constituted by the Admiralty on 28 June 1940. This was done by signal, sent to all Royal Naval commands, and was to be implemented with immediate effect.

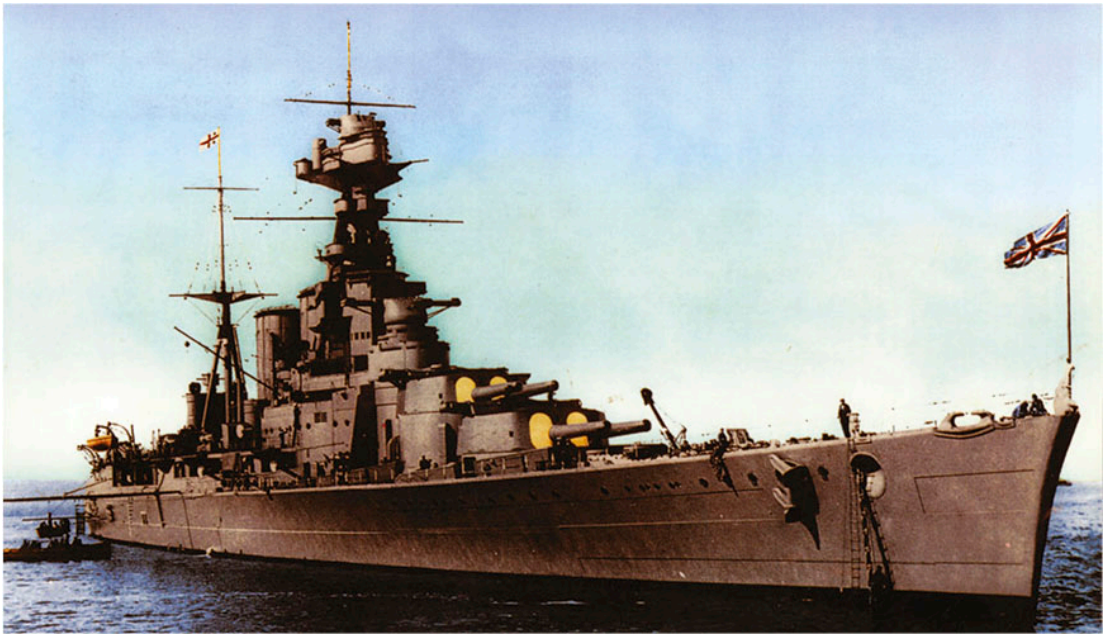
This signal read:

1. A detached squadron known as Force H each under the command of Vice Admiral Sir James Somerville has been constituted as follows: HM ships *Ark Royal, Hood, Resolution, Valiant, Arethusa, Faulknor, Foxhound, Fearless, Escapade, Forester,* Foresight.
2. The following ships will join Force H when they enter the limits of the North Atlantic Command: HM ships *Nelson, Enterprise, Delhi, Fame, Fury,* HMC ships *St. Laure*nt, Skene.
3. Force H will for the present be based at Gibraltar.
4. Subject to any instructions which may be given by the Admiralty the tasks of Force H will be;
   a. to prevent units of the talent fleet breaking out of the Mediterranean.
   b. to carry out offensive operations against the Italian fleet and Italian coast.

In fact, most of Force H had already been assembled before this. HMS *Hood* had reached Gibraltar five days earlier, on 23 June. The battlecruiser had been accompanied by the aircraft carrier HMS *Ark Royal*, and four destroyers (HMS *Escapade*, HMS *Faulknor*, HMS *Fearless* and HMS *Foxhound*). The battleship HMS *Resolution* was already in port, having

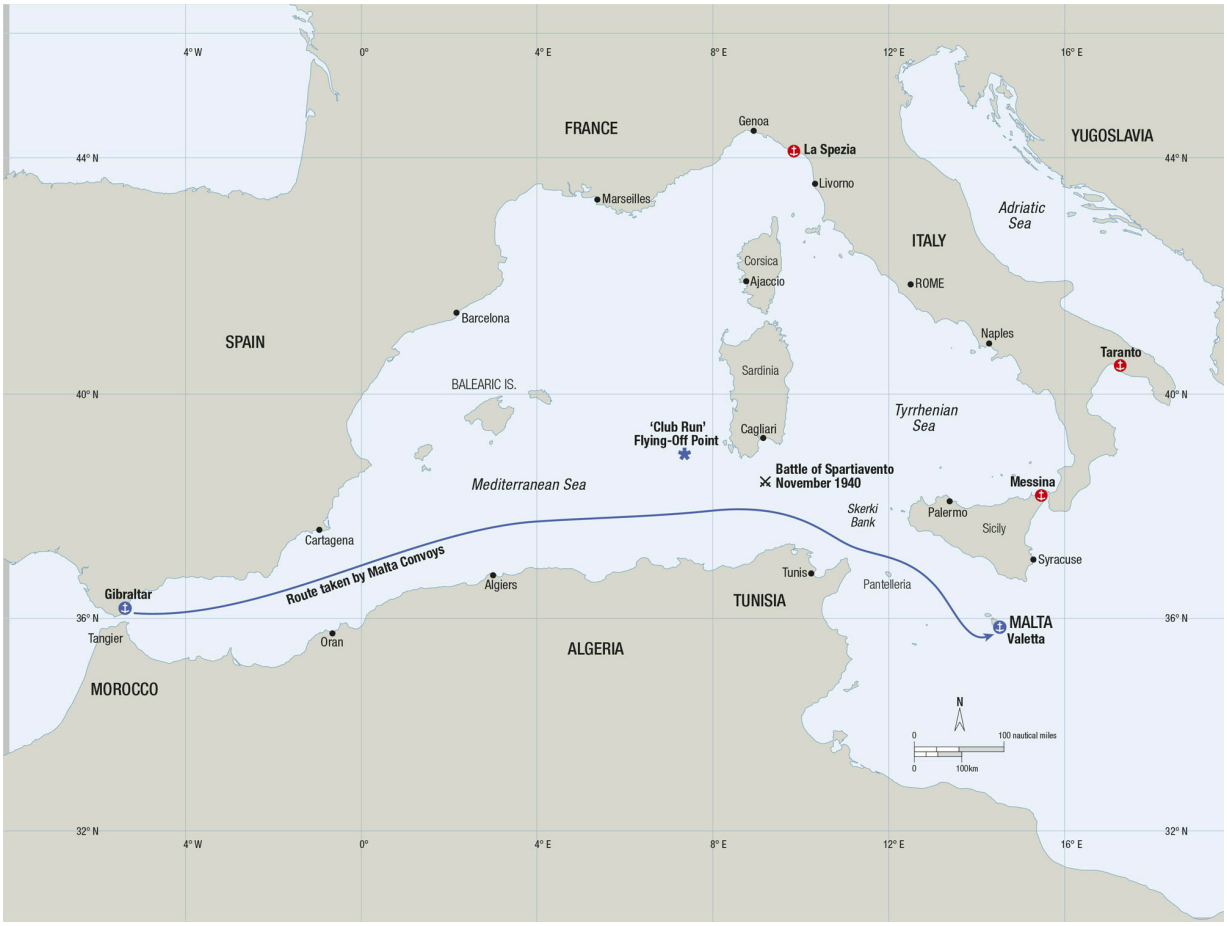
arrived there from Scapa Flow on 10 June. Finally, on 30 June Somerville arrived from Portsmouth aboard the light cruiser HMS *Arethusa*, while later that day the battleship HMS *Valiant* and the destroyers HMS *Forester* and HMS *Foresight* reached Gibraltar, having sailed from Scapa Flow on 26 June. On reaching Gibraltar on 30 June, Somerville transferred to *Hood*, where he raised his flag. So, two days after it was officially constituted, Force H was fully assembled.

Aboard *Hood*, Somerville considered the types of mission his new command would be expected to perform. It seemed that his area of operations had no geographical boundaries, but he would be called upon to operate in both the Western Mediterranean and the Atlantic. The only element of the signal that was specific to any theatre was the part which concerned the Italian fleet. Somerville decided that his primary strategic task was to safeguard Britain's control of the Strait of Gibraltar. By denying the Italian *Regia Marina* access to the Atlantic, he could prevent it joining forces with units of the German *Kriegsmarine*. While Somerville was very open to the idea of conducting offensive operations against the Italians in the Western Mediterranean, these would not be undertaken if it endangered his ability to fulfil this primary task. However, if he had the naval power, and his tenure of the Strait was not placed in jeopardy, then these offensive operations would be taken on, if they offered a tangible reward.



The battlecruiser HMS *Hood*, the first flagship of Force H. The sleek but elderly battlecruiser took part in Operation *Menace* and an early Club Run, but returned to home waters in early August 1940 while V. Adm. Somerville raised his flag in HMS *Renown* instead.

THE WESTERN MEDITERRANEAN, 1940–42



Later in 1940, other operational tasks for Force H were found. The first of these was the neutralizing of the French fleet based in Mediterranean or African ports. This profoundly distasteful but strategically vital task was given to Force H, as Somerville's command was singularly well placed and equipped to carry it out. Less suitable was the Admiralty's demand that Force H participate in the hunting of German raiders in the Atlantic, such as

the cruisers *Admiral Scheer* and *Admiral Hipper*. This had the potential to take elements of Force H far from their base for lengthy periods, and hence it risked the primary task of controlling the Strait. Less of a diversion was the covering of the passage of supplies and troops from the Western Mediterranean to Malta or the Eastern Mediterranean. During this phase of the war, Malta would serve as the dividing point between Somerville and Cunningham's areas of operations.

In the event of a war with Fascist Spain, Force H was to hold itself ready for offensive operations against Spanish naval forces and against Spanish ports, including the Balearic Islands and the Canary Islands. If circumstances dictated, Force H would also be required to participate in the capture of the Portuguese-held Azores, if the Portuguese government showed signs of siding with the Axis powers. Also, if the situation demanded, Force H might be required to assist in naval operations in the Indian Ocean – a mission that only came about in the spring of 1942, at which point Force H was finally disbanded. The lack of any formal area of operations for Force H, or even any geographical limitations made such widespread operations possible, if Somerville was also able to maintain his control of the Strait.

During its existence, Force H carried out 30 codenamed operations of various kinds, and numerous others which were more straightforward, and could be undertaken without the same degree of planning. From November 1940 on, one of the most regular of these was the Club Run – the sending of carriers within range of Malta, and then flying off fighter reinforcements for the island. From early 1941 on, Malta became the focal point of most of Force H's operations, whether they involved Club Runs or the escort of convoys bound for the beleaguered island. In mid-1940 though, and for a few months afterwards, Somerville would have to balance two objectives – the harrying of the Italians, to maintain Britain's initiative in the Western Mediterranean, and dealing with the thorny problem of the Vichy French fleet, which at the time was concentrated in the French North African port of Mers-el-Kébir, beside Oran. It is ironic then, that on 2 July 1940, when Force H sailed from Gibraltar on its first operational mission, its objective would be – if required – to turn its guns on the battlefleet of Britain's own former ally.

FLEET FIGHTING POWER

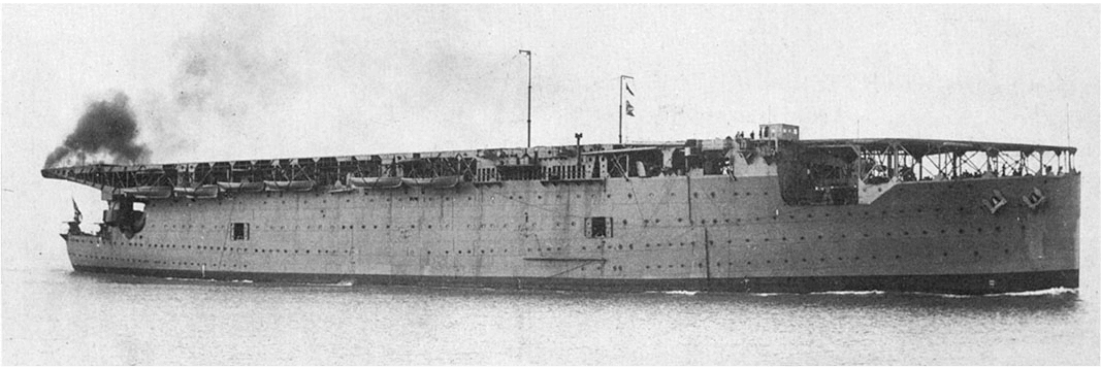
THE SHIPS

Right from the start, in late June 1940, Force H was a powerful fleet in miniature, incorporating a cross section of warships, from capital ships to destroyers and small support vessels. This was necessary because of the range of missions it was expected to undertake. Inevitably, during the 21 months Force H was in existence, warships came and went, either when returning to Britain for refit and repair, when sent to serve in other theatres, or occasionally through loss in action. In all during the period, seven battleships and three battlecruisers formed part of Force H at various times, as well as no fewer than six aircraft carriers. Of the smaller warships, 23 cruisers were attached to Force H at this time, along with 83 destroyers and two fast minelayers. These included warships which were attached to the operational command of Force H for specific missions, or were called upon to join the force when it was operating in the North Atlantic.

The original force consisted of the battlecruiser *Hood*, which served as the force flagship, two battleships (*Resolution* and *Valiant*), the aircraft carrier *Ark Royal*, the light cruiser *Arethusa* and six destroyers. These warships, together with six attached destroyers of the 13th Destroyer Flotilla composed the Royal Naval force which 'neutralized' the Vichy French fleet at Mers-el-Kébir on 3 July 1940, as part of Operation *Catapult*. This unfortunate but necessary action, ordered by the First Sea Lord, Admiral of the Fleet Sir Dudley Pound, was Force H's first operation. A month later, Somerville transferred his flag into the battlecruiser HMS *Renown*, as *Hood*, *Valiant*, *Arethusa* and five destroyers returned to home waters. They were replaced by the old light cruiser HMS *Enterprise* and seven destroyers. In between, the small carrier HMS *Argus* was temporarily

attached, to accompany *Ark Royal* on a Club Run – the flying-off of fighters bound for Malta.

Later in August during Operation *Hats*, Force H was temporarily joined by the new carrier HMS *Illustrious*, the battleship *Valiant*, two cruisers and a destroyer flotilla – all reinforcements for the Mediterranean Fleet, as Somerville covered their voyage as far as Malta, while delivering supplies to the island. Another temporary attachment was the battleship HMS *Barham*, when, during Operation *Menace*, Force H joined in the attack on French-held Dakar in West Africa. *Barham* joined Force H again, but only during another transit through the Mediterranean to Alexandria. For the most part, Somerville's force was left weakened after the departure of *Hood* and *Valiant*, as the only long-term replacement for the rest of 1940 was the light cruiser HMS *Sheffield*, which joined Somerville that August.



The light aircraft carrier HMS *Argus* was laid down as a liner, but in 1914 the hull was taken over by the Admiralty, and in September 1918 the vessel was commissioned as the aircraft carrier HMS *Argus*. By 1940, *Argus* had been demoted to a training carrier, and to an aircraft transport. Still, *Argus* carried out several Club Runs, and in late 1941 the aged carrier served as Force H's replacement for *Ark Royal*.

The situation would improve slightly in early 1941, with the arrival of the battleship HMS *Malaya* to augment Somerville's flagship *Renown*. In June 1941, *Sheffield* was eventually replaced in Force H by the AA cruiser HMS Hermione.

This fluidity of the force's composition appeared to be the norm. It seems that warships passing through Gibraltar might be temporarily pressed into service for certain missions, while in the Atlantic, additional reinforcements could be called upon. In addition, the Admiralty might

reinforce Force H before a particularly demanding series of missions, particularly with ships well-suited to the performance of those missions. For example, for Club Run missions, Force H's aircraft carrier *Ark Royal* usually carried out the operation on her own, but at other times the carrier was accompanied by others; twice by *Argus*, four times by *Furious* and once by *Vi*ctorious.

The core elements of Force H, however, took part in most of the missions the force was asked to perform. Of these, *Ark Royal* was the most heavily involved, with 41 operations, followed by Somerville's flagship *Renown* with 35. The attached cruiser had a total of 38 missions, of which 21 were carried out by *Sheffield*, and another 17 by the light cruiser's replacement, *Hermione*. Similar high levels of involvement were found among Force H destroyers, although these were replaced more frequently than larger warships. The initial group returned to home waters within a month, although many were quickly returned for the attack on Dakar that August. The F-class destroyers and the older destroyers of the 13th Flotilla, attached from the Gibraltar command, remained the most-employed warships of their type serving with Force H.

It was slightly unusual that V. Adm. Somerville usually chose a battlecruiser as his flagship, rather than a better-protected battleship. He only transferred his flag to battleships in the summer of 1941, more for their extra space for his staff than for any concerns about the armoured protection of his earlier flagships. The battleships which served with Force H were predominantly pre-war ones. Of the Queen Elizabeth class, the battleships *Barham*, *Malaya and Valiant* spent some time in Force H. Only *Queen Eizabeth* and *Warspite* never formed part of Somerville's command, although the class namesake did sail in company with Somerville during Operation *Tiger* in May 1941: the passage of reinforcements to join the Mediterranean Fleet in Alexandria.

V. Adm. Sir James Somerville (1882–1949) was a charismatic leader, who through his own drive was able to hone Force H into a thoroughly professional formation, capable of all the tasks the Admiralty asked of it. Somerville was popular with his men, but his reluctance to destroy the French fleet in 1940 earned him the enmity of the Prime Minister, Winston Churchill. Eventually though, Somerville gained Churchill's complete trust.

One of them, *Malaya*, served as the force flagship from November 1941 until the disbandment of Force H the following April. These were elderly warships – all but *Queen Elizabeth* had seen action at Jutland in 1916. During the inter-war years, all of them had been modified slightly, although only *Valiant* and *Warspite* had been thoroughly rebuilt to a modern standard. The same was also true of the Royal Sovereign class. Of these, only the battleship *Resolution* served in Force H, during its opening operations in the summer of 1940. Like the Queen Elizabeths, *Resolution*

was of World War I vintage and had only received limited modifications during the inter-war years.

Both battleship classes were armed with 15in guns, mounted in four twin turrets. They were reasonably well protected, but they were slow compared to more modern warships, and although they were upgraded as the war progressed, from 1940 to 1941 they lacked an adequate anti-aircraft capability. The same was true of the two 16in gun battleships *Nelson* and *Rodney*, which entered service during the 1920s. Still, they were well protected, and mounted nine 16in guns apiece, in three triple turrets. Although rarely directly attached to Force H, despite the initial orders of the Admiralty concerning *Nelson* being available for Atlantic operations, they did both operate as part of Force H in the latter half of 1941. That September *Nelson* briefly served as Somerville's flagship.

The battlecruisers *Hood* and *Renown* also mounted 15in guns, with four twin turrets in *Hood* and three in *Renown*. Although their armour was improved slightly in the aftermath of Jutland, they still lacked the protection afforded to battleships of the same vintage. Their real advantage was their speed. Being able to make 30kts, they were able to keep up with modern fleet carriers, which made them particularly useful to Somerville. Designed and laid down during World War I, they marked the final evolution of the battlecruiser, a design which, despite its flaws, still had value owing to the emphasis on speed. In the hunt for the *Bismarck* though, in May 1941, Somerville wisely declined to engage the modern German battleship with *Renown*, due to the battlecruiser's lack of armour.

As for fleet aircraft carriers, *Ark Royal* formed the real core of Force H, from the inception of the force in late June 1940 until the loss of the carrier in November 1941. That was a huge blow for Somerville, as this greatly limited the effectiveness of Force H. When commissioned in 1938, *Ark Royal* was the largest and most modern carrier in the fleet, boasting an armoured flight deck and two hangars, with a capacity of up to 60 aircraft. The ship could also make 30kts, which was an improvement over the preceding carriers, such as *Furious*, *Eagle* or *Argus*, which had been converted from other hulls. They were also smaller than *Ark Royal*, and could carry fewer aircraft. All of them though, would serve with Force H, especially when the campaign to supply Malta became a priority, and Club Runs became commonplace, flying off fighter aircraft bound for Malta.

The core of Force H at sea in April 1941 – the flagship HMS *Renown* and the aircraft carrier HMS *Ark Royal*. That month Force H carried out two successful Club Runs, while also patrolling the Bay of Biscay in search of Vichy French warships.

In the summer of 1940, HMS *Illustrious* entered service, the first of four carriers of the same class. These were developments of *Ark Royal*, with armoured flight decks and an aircraft capacity that was adequate, albeit not quite as large as *Ark Royal*. Both *Illustrious* and *Victorious* would briefly operate with Force H, either conducting Club Runs or in support of Malta Convoys. Ultimately though, both were destined to join Adm. Cunningham's Mediterranean Fleet.

Arguably, apart from the carriers, the most versatile asset in Force H was its contingent of cruisers, either light ones mounting 6in guns, or heavy cruisers armed with 8in guns. Of these, the Town-class light cruiser *Sheffield* was the core cruiser of the force, replacing *Arethusa* when the older cruiser returned home in August 1940. Unlike *Arethusa* with just six guns in three twin turrets, *Sheffield*, a Southampton-class cruiser, had 12 6in guns, in four triple turrets, supported by a relatively modern suite of radar. Sister ships *Manchester* and *Southampton* briefly joined Force H in late 1940, for specific missions.

AIRCRAFT USED IN 'CLUB RUN' OPERATIONS	
Operating from carrier:	
Ferrying Aircraft (RAF)	**Escorting Aircraft (FAA)**
Hawker Hurricane (fighter) Range: 520nm (800nm with fuel tanks) Cruising Speed: 180kts	**Blackburn Skua** (fighter-bomber) Range: 660nm Cruising Speed: 180kts
Supermarine Spitfire (fighter) Range: 416nm (960nm with fuel tanks) Cruising Speed: 250kts	**Fairey Fulmar** (fighter) Range: 668nm Cruising Speed: 180kts
Operating from Malta:	
Escorting Aircraft (RAF)	**Patrol Aircraft (Coastal Command)**
Bristol Blenheim (light bomber) Range: 1,270nm Cruising Speed: 170kts	**Short Sunderland** (flying boat) Range: 1,550nm Cruising Speed: 155kts
Lockheed Hudson (light bomber) Range: 1,700nm Cruising Speed: 190kts	

The fleet carrier HMS *Ark Royal* was the real offensive centrepiece of Force H. Commissioned in November 1938, the carrier saw service off Norway and in the South Atlantic before joining Force H in June 1940. Pictured here, practising deck landings are Swordfish torpedo-bombers – *Ark Royal*'s main strike force.

That summer the older E-class cruiser *Enterprise* also joined Somerville's force for the Mers-el-Kébir operation. In June 1941, *Sheffield* was replaced by the Dido-class AA cruiser *Hermione*. This greatly

improved the AA protection afforded Force H, and the cruiser regularly accompanied *Ark Royal*, acting as the carrier's protective 'gatekeeper'. On occasion, other cruisers, such as the heavy cruiser *Berwick* or the light cruisers *Edinburgh*, *Kenya* or *Euryalus*, were attached to Force H for missions, such as the Malta Convoy codenamed Operation *Halberd* in September 1941. The latter, another Dido-class AA cruiser, proved particularly useful for Malta Convoy missions.

From the start, Force H was well-served by fleet destroyers. Initially, Somerville was given six destroyers, all E class or F class, built in the mid-1930s. These were all armed with four 4.7in guns and eight 21in torpedoes, in two quadruple launchers. The Admiralty tended to build destroyers in groups of six or eight, with each batch classed according to a letter of the alphabet. All A to I class destroyers were similar, and all were capable of speeds of up to 36kts. The I-class ones though had quintuple torpedo launchers. These fleet destroyers were equally useful in an offensive role or as escorts for either other warships or a convoy.

Somerville could also draw on the 13th Flotilla based in Gibraltar, which was made up of older V- and W-class destroyers, of World War I vintage. These tended to mount four 4in guns and carry six 21in torpedoes, in two triple launchers, but by 1940 several had been modified slightly to make them more effective escort vessels. During Operation *Catapult* in July 1940, Force H was joined by *Wrestler*, *Vidette* and *Vortigern*, all of the 13th Flotilla. Of these, *Vidette* was modified into a long-ranger ASW escort. In addition, several other fleet destroyers of various classes were temporarily attached to Force H, or in the case of the G- and H-class destroyers, *Greyhound*, *Gallant*, *Griffin*, *Hero* and *Hotspur*, they replaced the bulk of the F-class ships when they returned home.

In August 1941 a few Tribal-class destroyers joined Force H. These were sometimes known as gun destroyers, as they mounted eight 4.7in guns in twin turrets, but only one quadruple 21in torpedo launcher. This made them useful as close escorts. By 1941, these were joined by J-, K- and N-class destroyers, which also mounted 4.7in guns, in three twin turrets, but two quintuple torpedo launchers. These were followed by L- and M-class destroyers, which were similar, only they mounted eight torpedoes in two quintuple launchers. For most missions though, the stalwarts of Force H were the F-class and G- and H-class destroyers mentioned above. For all

their offensive capabilities, most of the time these fleet destroyers were used as escorts for the larger warships, so their proven effectiveness in the anti-aircraft role was more important than their more traditional surface warfare capability.

The open bridge of HMS *Sheffield* was typical of British warships of this period, where all-round visibility was deemed more important than crew comfort. Although bridge lookouts were vital, the Southampton-class light cruiser also carried an air warning radar, and often served as the guard ship of the force.

CLUB RUNS

The ‘Club Run’ was the informal name given to the ferrying of fighter aircraft by Force H from Gibraltar to Malta. During this period, Malta was under almost daily air assault, and so fighters were desperately needed. Once there though, RAF Malta Command suffered heavy fighter losses, mainly through aircraft being destroyed on the ground during bombing raids. Still, between August 1940 and March 1942, Force H made 17 Club Runs, which saw the successful transfer of 333 RAF Hurricanes and 31 RAF Spitfires. In addition, 37 Fleet Air Arm aircraft were also flown there. Despite the loss of 22 aircraft, mostly through mechanical failure or having run out of fuel, these operations were deemed to be incredibly successful, offering the beleaguered Malta garrison a much-needed lifeline.

The way these Club Runs operated was relatively simple. Aircraft were transported to Gibraltar by way of aircraft carriers or else carried as crated freight in merchant ships. There they were prepared for flight, before being flown to the aircraft carrier which would undertake the Club Run. Most of the time this was HMS *Ark Royal*, but the smaller carriers HMS *Argus* and HMS *Eagle*, or the fleet carriers HMS *Furious* and HMS *Victorious* were also used.

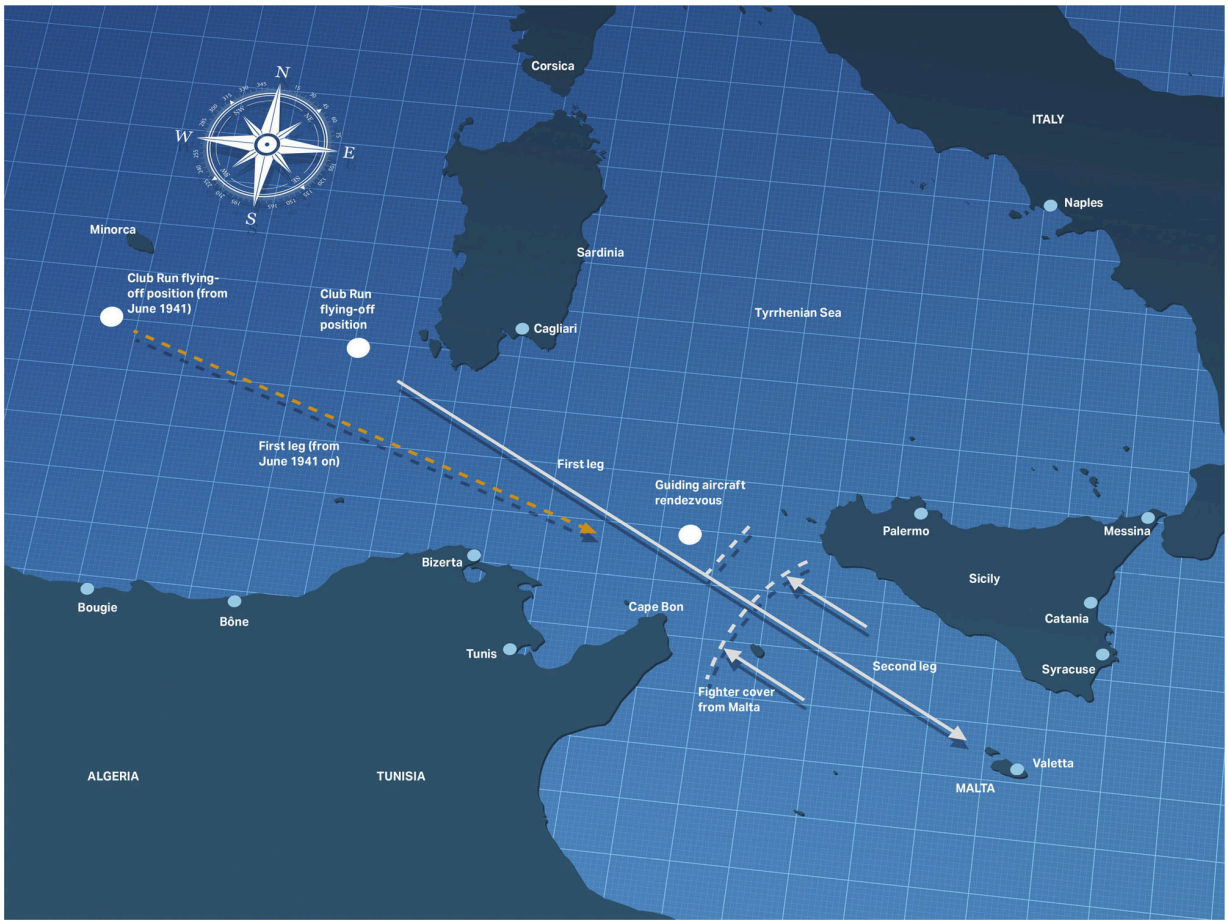
The carrier would sail into the Western Mediterranean, screened by the rest of Force H. Then, on reaching its flying-off position to the south-west of Sardinia between 6° and 8° East, the fighters being ferried would be launched. At first the fighters being ferried were accompanied by Fleet Air Arm fighters, either Skuas or Fulmars, which would act as guides, one for each group of 12–16 aircraft. Once assembled, the aerial convoy would fly towards the south-east for around 250 nautical miles, to The Narrows, the channel between the coast of Vichy-French Tunisia and the south-west tip of Sicily. There, search aircraft, usually Sunderland flying boats, would be waiting for them. These would pass the ferrying group over to light bombers from RAF Malta, such as Blenheims or Hudsons, which would guide the reinforcements on to Malta, some 175 miles further to the south-east. At the handover point, the FAA guides would usually return to their home carrier.

By mid-1941, the arrangement had been changed, so the Malta-based light bombers would rendezvous with the carrier, and then escort the ferrying aircraft all the way to Malta. FAA fighters would provide an additional escort as far as The Narrows.

From June 1941, extra fuel tanks were available for the ferrying Hurricanes, which extended their range to over 800 nautical miles – more than enough to reach Malta. As the enemy was now aware of how Club Runs operated, Somerville was concerned that forewarned of

Force H's departure by spies, they would be waiting for the carrier near its flying-off position. These fuel tanks allowed Somerville the flexibility to move the flying-off position further west and so avoid any enemy ambush.

Fighter cover was provided by the FAA for the first leg of the Club Run, and by RAF Malta for the second. In all, the ferrying operation would take around three hours. The most dangerous point was the second leg, as it passed close to Axis airfields in Sicily and Pantelleria. If the enemy realized what was happening, then shortly after reaching Malta, they would bomb the airfields in the hope of catching the ferried aircraft on the ground.



TECHNOLOGY

Being a small but powerful, well-balanced force, and with a brief to operate in either the Atlantic or the Mediterranean, Force H had to be ready to face a range of challenges. This, of course, meant it had to be able to make the best possible use of the technology at its disposal, to give it an advantage over the enemy. The nature of this technology though, changed over the 21 months the force was in existence.

Offensive Weapons

When Force H was first created in the summer of 1940, its main offensive power lay in the guns and torpedoes mounted in its warships. The guns of course, ranged from the 15in ordnance mounted in capital ships to the 4in and 4.7in guns of the destroyers. The torpedoes were all 21in ones, the only difference being the mountings from which they were launched. Generally, all these weapons were little changed from the ones developed during the previous war. In the inter-war period though, they had all been upgraded slightly, which meant they had an improved performance. For instance, the 15in Mark I guns in the fleet had their mountings altered before the war, which increased their maximum elevation to 30°. This in turn increased their maximum range to almost 15 nautical miles.

The 8in/50 Mk VIII guns of British heavy cruisers had a similar range, at a 45° elevation, while the 6in/50 BL Mk XXIII gun carried in light cruisers such as *Sheffield* had a range of 25,000yds at the same elevation – the equivalent of 12.5 nautical miles. A 4.7in QF Mk IX gun of the type fitted to many of Force H's destroyers was limited to a maximum range of 17,000yds, or 8.4 nautical miles at the mounting's maximum elevation of 40°. The accuracy of fire depended on the use of a centralized gunnery direction system. Essentially, this revolved around the can-like gun director, mounted high up in the warship, manned by a small team led by the ship's gunnery officer.

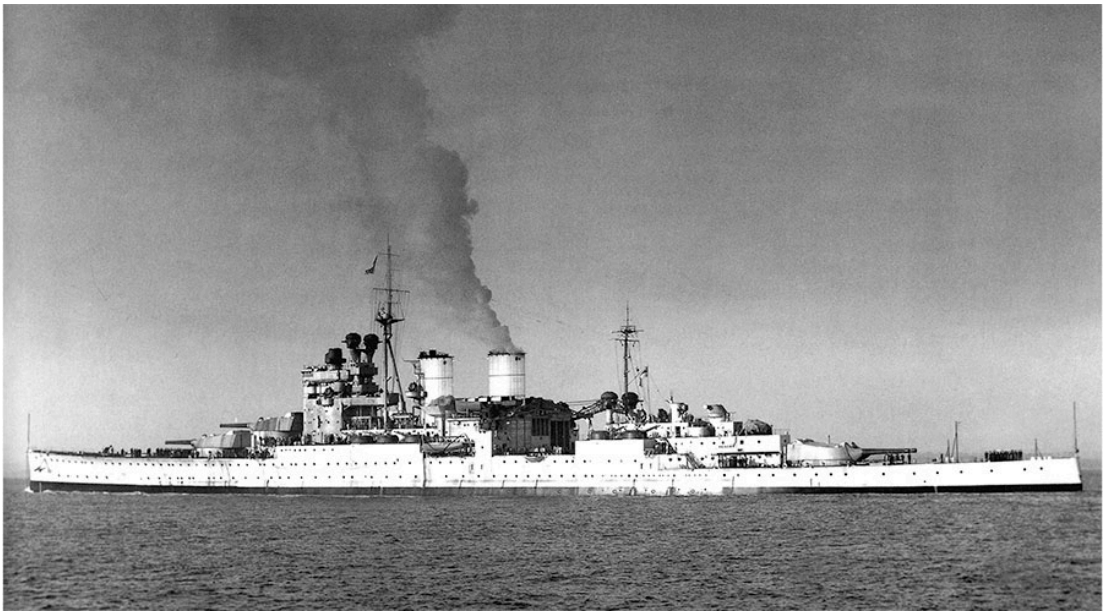
Barr and Stroud optical coincidence rangefinders were used to determine the range of the enemy, while other information was also gathered, before this was all fed to a transmitting station below the ship's waterline. There,

an analogue computer would gather information on range, bearing, course, speed and other relevant data, and calculate a firing solution for the ship's guns, in terms of elevation and bearing. In general, it was an efficient system, albeit one that had first been developed during World War I, and then upgraded in the same way as the ordnance it served. It was only later in the war that the development of fire control radar would alter the way gunnery was conducted.

Force H at sea, photographed from HMS *Sheffield*. Somerville's flagship HMS *Renown* (left) leads the aircraft carrier HMS *Ark Royal* during the sortie into the Atlantic that led to the carrier's successful last-ditch air strike on the German battleship *Bismarck*. The rough seas encountered on Force H's voyage north forced Somerville to send his escorting destroyers back to Gibraltar.

Theoretically, the rate of fire of the 15in guns of the battleships and battlecruisers was around two rounds per minute. This gave just sufficient time for the spotters to note the accuracy of the fall of shot, and for the director team to alter the range accordingly. Despite gunnery manuals claiming a higher rate of fire for the 8in guns of heavy cruisers, in effect it was around three to four rounds per minute when in action. For 6in light

cruisers, the rate of fire was about five or six rounds per minute. This though, decreased if the guns were at a high elevation, as it took more time to depress them so they could be loaded.



Although HMS *Renown* (pictured) and sister ship HMS *Repulse* were built during World War I, they were both extensively modified in the 1930s. Here, her hangar amidships can be seen, as well as her effective anti-aircraft armament, supporting the ship's main battery of six 15in guns.

However, during the war it was found that for short periods, usually no more than 15 minutes, 6in gun crews could bypass the semi-automatic loading systems of their turrets, and manually load their guns at a slightly higher speed. In these circumstances, up to eight rounds a minute was possible, until the turret crew became too exhausted to continue the manual loading of shells and powder cartridges. In destroyers, manual loading of 4in or 4.7in guns was the norm, and rates of fire of ten rounds a minute were possible. The power-rammers fitted in the twin turret of Tribal-class and other later war-built destroyers increased this slightly, to up to 12 rounds per minute. However, these gun mountings were exposed to the elements, and so in poor weather the rate of fire could fall drastically, as of course would accuracy.

The torpedo was still an important weapon in destroyers, but its value was gradually overtaken by the gun as the war progressed. It was carried in most of the cruisers and all of Force H's destroyers. As a self-propelled weapon the 21in Mk IX torpedo required fairly simple launching equipment. Once launched, it ran at an even depth setting and speed towards the aiming point. Its drawback was that it was fairly slow, making 40kts, and had a limited effective range of around 11,000yds, or 5.4 nautical miles. This meant that the shorter the range the better the chance of scoring a hit against a fast-moving target.

If it made contact, the torpedo's 722lb charge of TNT could do considerable damage, sinking a merchant ship and causing serious damage to a warship. Typically, a destroyer carried two quadruple or quintuple torpedo launchers on its centreline, and with gyro-angling fitted in the torpedoes themselves these could be launched in a spread towards the bow and stern quarters, as well as out on the beam of the launching ship. Much though, depended on the accurate prediction of the target ship's likely course during the time the torpedoes were running in the water.

Defensive Weapons

During the inter-war years, the Admiralty paid too little attention to the provision of adequate anti-aircraft weapons for its ships, and consequently it paid the price. By the time Force H was formed, this weakness was laid bare by exposure to German dive bombers in Norwegian waters and off Dunkirk. So, steps were already being taken to remedy the problem. One element in this weakness was the lack of suitability of most guns for AA use. Heavier breech-loading guns were of no use against aircraft and in destroyers many quick-firing guns lacked the ability to engage fast-moving aircraft accurately. While this might have been acceptable in the Atlantic, accurate AA capability was far more important in the Mediterranean theatre, where Force H would be exposed to Axis land-based aircraft.

In the afternoon of 27 September 1941, while Force H was escorting the *Halberd* convoy, Somerville's flagship HMS *Nelson* was hit by a torpedo launched from an Italian SM.79 bomber. This shows the attacking aircraft, moments after dropping its torpedo. Although damage was minimal, the battleship was forced to return to Gibraltar for repairs.

So, from the start the Admiralty tried to send Somerville destroyers with main guns which were dual-purpose (DP), capable of high-angle fire against aircraft as well as engaging surface targets. These guns, together with the secondary batteries in the force's larger warships, were capable of putting up flak barrages, designed to make it costly for an enemy bomber formation to fly through it during their attack. With poorly developed targeting systems and a relatively slow rate of fire, this was arguably the most effective use for these heavier AA guns.

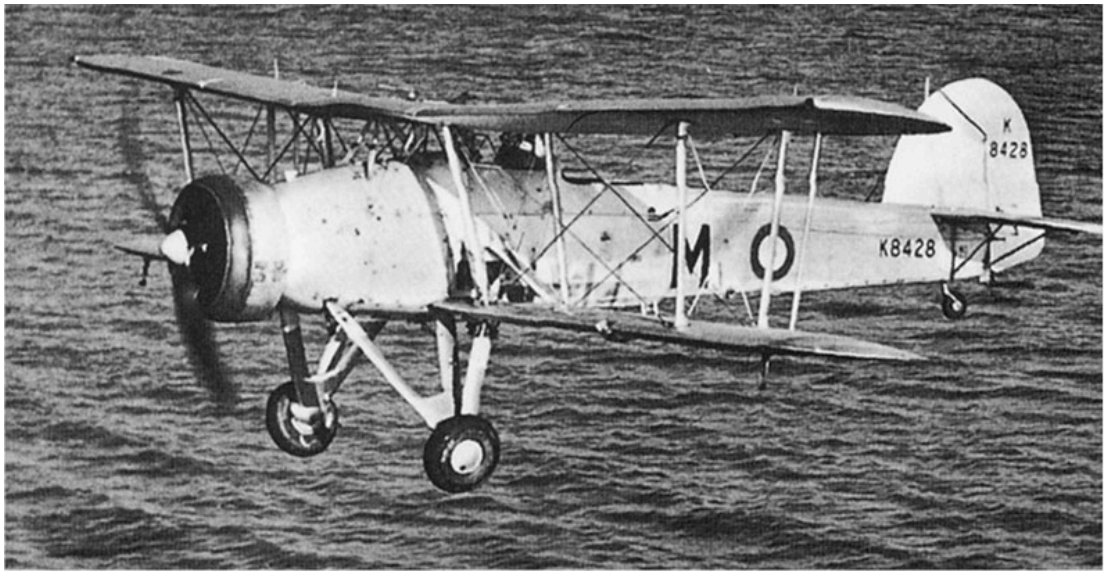
For close-range fire, the Royal Navy relied on the 2-pdr (40mm) 'pom-pom' QF Mk VIII gun, which was usually fitted in quadruple or octuple mountings. These multiple pom-pom mounts produced a high volume of fire, of almost 100 rounds per minute per barrel, and had an effective range of around 1,700yds, and a ceiling of 13,300ft. These were water-cooled weapons, and reloaded themselves on the recoil, just like a machine gun. They proved effective and were retained throughout the period. Supporting

them, at least in the early years of the war, were quadruple-mounted Vickers 0.5in machine guns. Although these lacked the range and stopping power of the multiple pom-pom, they were better than nothing. As the war progressed, these weapons were gradually replaced by 40mm Bofors and 20mm Oerlikons respectively, in single or twin mountings. This programme though, had not got fully under way by the time Force H was disbanded in the spring of 1942.

During the 1930s, the Royal Navy developed the High Angle Director System (HACS–High Angle Control System), a sort of AA version of the regular gun director used for surface combat. In theory, these stabilized directors were able to track moving aircraft in three dimensions, and pass on the tracking information to the high-angle gun and pom-pom batteries. This was less effective against low-flying targets, or dive bombers. This was also true of the Mark IV director, used to control 'pom-pom' fire, but its lack of an effective stabiliser made it less than ideal. The real game changer in AA fire control was the development of radar fire control. By late 1941 and early 1942, an increasing number of warships had a combination of air search radars and dedicated fire control radars serving the ship's AA batteries. These greatly improved prediction and accuracy, and as a result made the ships less vulnerable to air attack.

Sensors

Detection of submarines was by Asdic, which was first developed during the closing months of World War I. Asdic, which today is better known as sonar, was improved during the inter-war period, and by 1940 it was considered reasonably accurate. It worked by sending out a pulse of sound, and this soundwave travelled through the water until it struck something, such as a pile of rocks, a shoal of fish or a U-boat. The pulse then bounced back, where a receiver on the transmitting ship picked it up. By measuring the time the pulse had travelled, the distance and direction of the target could be found. Unfortunately, at this stage of the war it couldn't determine the depth of the contact – an important piece of missing information, as it was needed to set depth charges, so they could explode close to the contact.



The 18in Mark XII aerial torpedo carried by *Ark Royal*'s Swordfish was usually dropped from a height of 100ft or less. In theory, the biplane's maximum speed when carrying a torpedo was 134kts, but during the *Bismarck* attack on 26 May 1941, it was considerably less due to the poor weather conditions. Once dropped, the torpedo had a range of 1,500yds, at a speed of 40kts.

The typical range of a sonar set depended on salinity and other factors, but, generally, effective detection range was around 1 nautical mile. Sonar had a couple of limitations. First, it projected in a wide cone from the sonar dome under the searching ship, which meant that as the ship approached the contact, say on a depth charge run, then contact would be lost during the final minute or so before the depth charges were released. By late 1941, thanks to Capt. Frederic John Walker RN, escorts learned to hunt in groups, so that one could maintain sonar contact while another carried out the attack. This, however, required good cooperation between the two escorts, using short-wave radio. It also took a lot of practice. In Force H, destroyers mounted Type 128 Asdic, which was introduced in 1939. Cruisers and some battleships had Type 138, a slightly older set, but this was purely for defensive purposes. Forewarned of a contact, the cruiser or larger warships could alter course away from it.

The most game-changing technical development of the war was Radio Direction Finding (RDF), which by the end of the war was known by its American name, radar. The first operational set, Type 79, was an air warning one developed in the summer of 1938, which had a range of up to

50 nautical miles, when detecting aircraft flying at 5,000ft or more. It had limited effectiveness though, as it only gave you the very approximate range and bearing of approaching aircraft, but not their height. That was why it was described as an 'air warning' radar, as it was not considered suitable for more precise ranging. Incidentally, the first Royal Naval warship to receive radar was the light cruiser *Sheffield*, which had Type 79 installed to test its effectiveness. There was a transmitting and a receiving antenna, one at each masthead.

By July 1940, when Force H began operations, very few warships had radar fitted. During the latter part of the year, Type 279 was introduced, an improved version of Type 79, allowing a far more precise calibration of range, with an accuracy of 50yds. With both sets, the higher the approaching aircraft was, the further away it could be detected. Type 279, for instance, which was widely introduced into the fleet during 1941, could detect an aircraft at up to 95 miles if it was flying at 16,000ft, but this dropped to 24 miles at 1,000ft. Below that, it was lucky to detect an aircraft at 7.5 miles. Still, both sets bought time for the tracking warship and its consorts to prepare themselves for an air attack, and have their guns directed onto the predicted bearing of the enemy.

In late 1940, Type 284 was developed, a fire control radar designed to support main gun batteries on cruisers and capital ships. This was the first of a series of ground-breaking fire control radars which helped increase the accuracy of naval gunnery, and permit actions in poor visibility or at night. The first set was fitted into *Nelson* in June 1940, and was found to be able to detect a group of ships at 15 miles, and a lone one at 9–10 miles. A long rectangular device some 21ft long, it was usually fitted to the foremast. This proved highly successful, and was fitted in numerous warships of cruiser size or above before the end of the year.

In 1941, a range of new radar sets were introduced. Types 271 was a surface search radar set, developed as a high priority for use by escort vessels in the Battle of the Atlantic. The 'cheese wedge'-shaped antenna was normally enclosed in a distinctive can-shaped plastic-coated 'Chinese lantern' structure, which was usually mounted above and behind the ship's bridge. These could detect an individual battleship at 11 miles, and a destroyer at 8. Generally, the range was cited as 10–25 nautical miles, with the larger distance referring to detecting groups of ships, such as a convoy

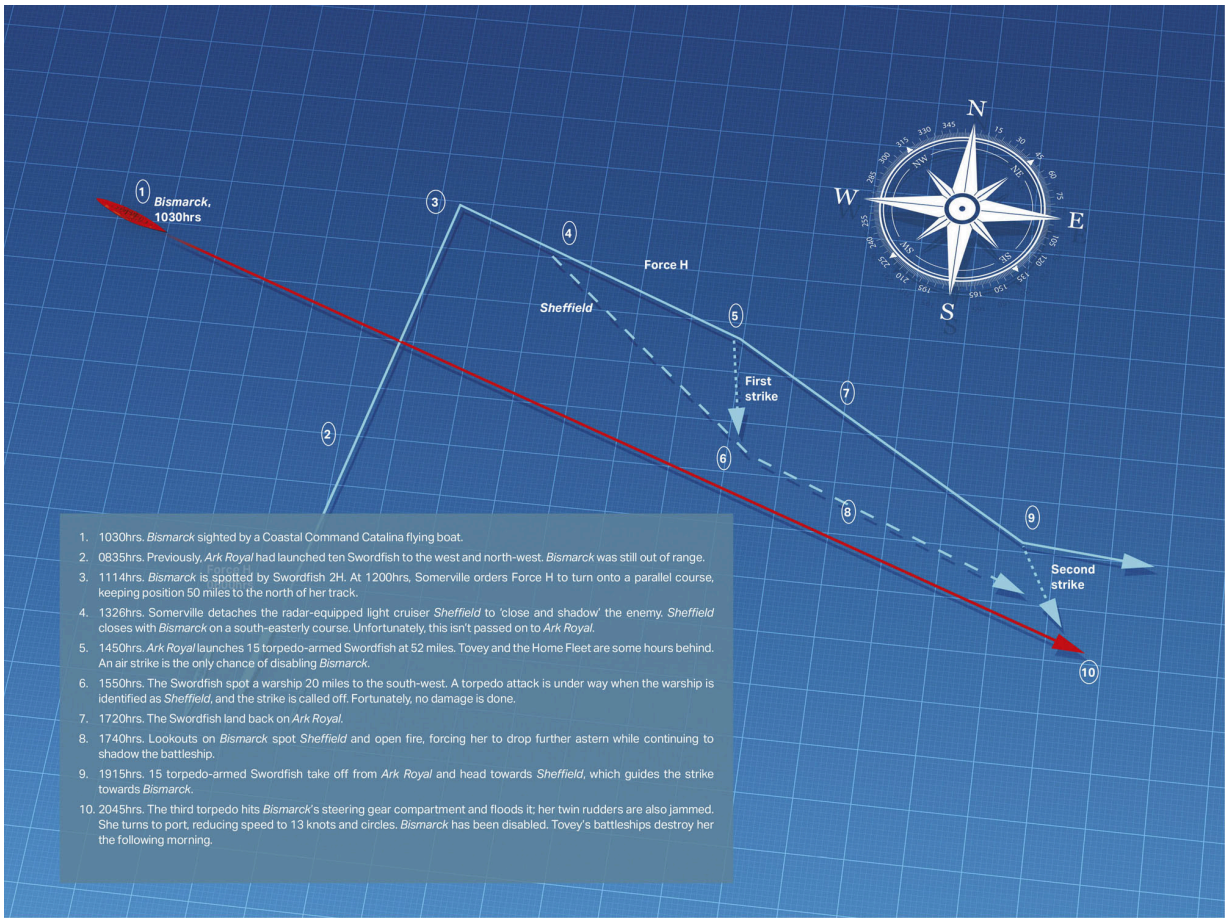
or naval task force. This new surface search radar was of great tactical importance and proved its worth for Somerville during the hunt for the German battleship *Bismarck* in May 1941. Later that year, Type 272 and Type 273 versions were introduced, each slightly better than the previous version. For instance, a Type 273 set could detect a battleship at 19 miles, which was beyond effective gunnery range. This then, gave the radar-equipped warship a singular advantage in a naval engagement.

Another development in 1941 was the introduction of a Fire Control radar for short-range anti-aircraft batteries. The Type 282 set was designed for use with multiple pom-poms, and soon antennas for them were mounted on top of individual pom-pom mounts. There were two small tripod-shaped 'yagis' or antennas, one to transmit and the other to receive. When it first appeared it proved problematic, as with a beam width of 40°, radar operators had difficulty identifying individual aircraft. This though, was dealt with, and by early 1942 the Type 282 was considered both accurate and reliable. Later in the war it was also used to direct the fire of 40mm Bofors guns. Although its range was limited to just 3 miles, this was enough to help a ship's AA batteries concentrate their fire on approaching aircraft.

FORCE H IN THE HUNT FOR THE *BISMARCK*, 26 MAY 1941

At 0200hrs on 24 May, Force H sailed from Gibraltar and headed west into the Atlantic, to protect troop convoy WS.8B. This was in response to the sortie by the German battleship *Bismarck*, accompanied by the heavy cruiser *Prinz Eugen*. Four hours later, and 1,900 miles away, *Bismarck* engaged and sank the British battlecruiser *Hood*, damaged the battleship *Prince of Wales*, and broke out into the North Atlantic. Although the Germans were shadowed, Admiral Lütjens, the fleet admiral embarked in *Bismarck*, managed to detach *Prinz Eugen* successfully and then evade his pursuers. So, from dawn on 25 May, the British had no firm idea where *Bismarck* was. V. Adm. Somerville in *Renown* was ordered to lead Force H north, to intercept Lütjens, in case he headed towards the coast of German-occupied France. Then, at 1030hrs on Monday morning, *Bismarck* was spotted by a Catalina flying

boat operating from Northern Ireland. The German battleship was steaming south-west, towards Brest. It soon became clear that the battleships of Adm. Tovey's Home Fleet would be unable to intercept *Bismarck*. The only chance of stopping Lütjens was by an air strike launched from the aircraft carrier *Ark Royal*.


N
W
E
S
1
Bismarck, 1030hrs
2
3
4
Force H
Sheffield
5
First strike
6
7
8
9
Second strike
10
1. 1030hrs. *Bismarck* sighted by a Coastal Command Catalina flying boat.
2. 0835hrs. Previously, *Ark Royal* had launched ten Swordfish to the west and north-west. *Bismarck* was still out of range.
3. 1114hrs. *Bismarck* is spotted by Swordfish 2H. At 1200hrs, Somerville orders Force H to turn onto a parallel course, keeping position 50 miles to the north of her track.
4. 1326hrs. Somerville detaches the radar-equipped light cruiser *Sheffield* to 'close and shadow' the enemy. *Sheffield* closes with *Bismarck* on a south-easterly course. Unfortunately, this isn't passed on to *Ark Royal*.
5. 1450hrs. *Ark Royal* launches 15 torpedo-armed Swordfish at 52 miles. Tovey and the Home Fleet are some hours behind. An air strike is the only chance of disabling *Bismarck*.
6. 1550hrs. The Swordfish spot a warship 20 miles to the south-west. A torpedo attack is under way when the warship is identified as *Sheffield*, and the strike is called off. Fortunately, no damage is done.
7. 1720hrs. The Swordfish land back on *Ark Royal*.
8. 1740hrs. Lookouts on *Bismarck* spot *Sheffield* and open fire, forcing her to drop further astern while continuing to shadow the battleship.
9. 1915hrs. 15 torpedo-armed Swordfish take off from *Ark Royal* and head towards *Sheffield*, which guides the strike towards *Bismarck*.
10. 2045hrs. The third torpedo hits *Bismarck*'s steering gear compartment and floods it; her twin rudders are also jammed. She turns to port, reducing speed to 13 knots and circles. *Bismarck* has been disabled. Tovey's battleships destroy her the following morning.

One final noteworthy radar development in 1941 was the introduction of the Type 286 radar, which was based on an existing airborne radar, the ASV Mk I. It was billed as a combined air warning and surface search radar, but it never really performed well in either role. Its defects were its excessive topweight, its short range and the confusing 'back echoes' it created astern of the transmitting ship, which made detection challenging. Its advantage was that it was available and could be fitted on a destroyer's masthead in

less than a week. So by the summer of 1941, many of Force H's destroyers had been fitted with a set. In theory it had a range of 20 miles, but in practice it was just 9 miles for large surface targets. Operators were lucky to detect approaching aircraft at much over 3–4 miles. Still, it was better than nothing at all, especially when operating at night.

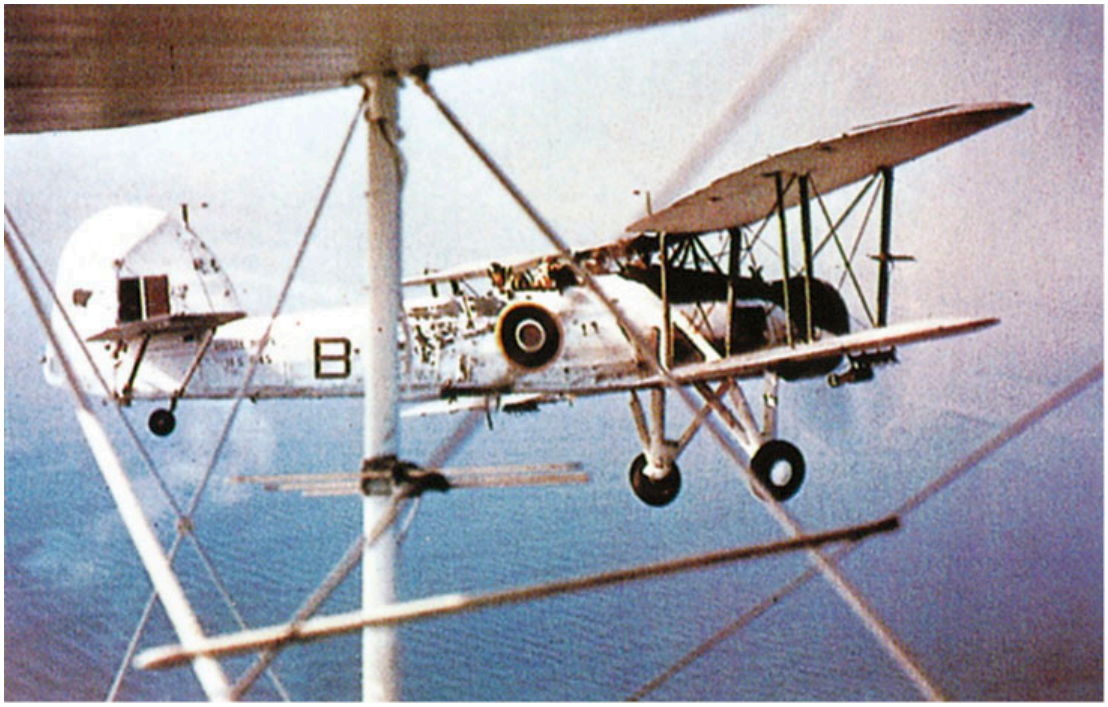
Aircraft

Until its loss in November 1941, the main striking force of Force H was the air wing of Fleet Air Arm (FAA) Swordfish torpedo-bombers embarked in *Ark Royal*. The *Ark Royal* was the first modern, purpose-built fleet aircraft carrier in the Royal Navy. When the war began *Ark Royal* was serving with the Home Fleet, with an air wing embarked that consisted of the Fairey Swordfish and the Blackburn Skua. The Skua was a two-seater monoplane fighter-bomber of limited effectiveness. The Swordfish though, was a three-seater biplane torpedo-bomber, spotter and reconnaissance aircraft (TSR). Although slow and lumbering, with a top speed of 140kts when carrying a torpedo, the Swordfish was robust and could stay in the air for five and a half hours, making it an excellent search aircraft. It was this versatility that ensured that the obsolete Swordfish would remain in service throughout the war.

In late June 1940, *Ark Royal* arrived in Gibraltar, and duly became the offensive core of Force H. At the time, the carrier's embarked air group consisted of five naval air squadrons (NAS):

EMBARKED SQUADRON	AIRCRAFT
800 NAS	12 Blackburn Skua (fighter-bombers)
801 NAS	11 Blackburn Skua (fighter-bombers)
810 NAS	12 Fairey Swordfish (torpedo-bombers)
818 NAS	9 Fairey Swordfish (torpedo-bombers)
820 NAS	11 Fairey Swordfish (torpedo-bombers)

In addition, two Supermarine Walrus float planes from 701 NAS were embarked, to provide air search and rescue (ASR) cover for the air group.



Despite being considered obsolete by modern military standards, the Fairey Swordfish served the Fleet Air Arm well, and formed the strike element of HMS *Ark Royal*, with 810, 820 and later 818 Naval Air Squadrons (NAS) embarked – a total of 30 aircraft. Although considered a torpedo- bomber, the Swordfish also doubled as a reconnaissance aircraft.

This air complement remained the same until October 1940, when *Ark Royal* returned to Britain, and went into refit in Liverpool. During this time with Force H the air group had lost nine aircraft during operations against the Vichy French and the Italians. On returning to Gibraltar on 31 October, the carrier rejoined Force H, and was available for operations a week later.

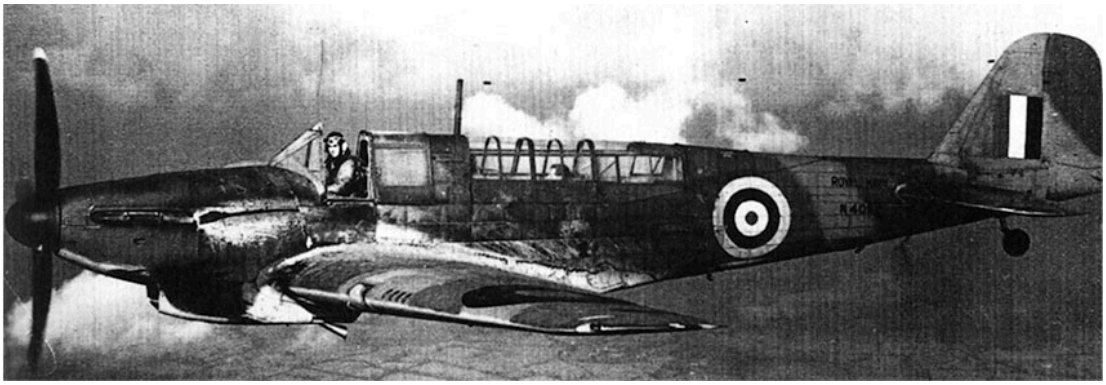
At this point its embarked air group was made up of four Fleet Air Arm squadrons:

EMBARKED SQUADRON	AIRCRAFT
800 NAS	12 Blackburn Skua (fighter-bombers)
808 NAS	7 Fairey (Fulmar fighters)
810 NAS	12 Fairey Swordfish (torpedo-bombers)
818 NAS	9 Fairey Swordfish (torpedo-bombers)
820 NAS	9 Fairey Swordfish (torpedo-bombers)

The following months saw *Ark Royal*'s Swordfish launch attacks on the Italian battlefleet at Spartiavento and carry out a strike on the Tirso Dam in Sicily. The spring of 1941 began with Club Run operations in the Western Mediterranean and ended with the hunt for the German battleship *Bismarck* in the Atlantic. After the carrier's return to Gibraltar, the air group was modified to incorporate the following five squadrons:

EMBARKED SQUADRON	AIRCRAFT
807 NAS	9 Fairey (Fulmar fighters)
808 NAS	9 Fairey (Fulmar fighters)
810 NAS	12 Fairey Swordfish (torpedo-bombers)
818 NAS	9 Fairey Swordfish (torpedo-bombers)
825 NAS	9 Fairey Swordfish (torpedo-bombers)

This air group remained embarked in *Ark Royal* until the carrier's loss on 13 November 1941. During the carrier's deployment with Force H, its efficiency suffered through a lack of fighter control facilities. *Ark Royal* lacked an air warning radar, and so the carrier's fighter controller relied on detection information, complete with range and bearing being passed to him by escorting warships. To add to the delay, this was usually done using flag hoist rather than by radio, to avoid breaking radio silence. Instructions were then passed to the observer in the Fulmar flown by the commander of the fighter force using Morse code. After calculating the course and speed to intercept the enemy aircraft, the observer would pass this to the pilot using his voice pipe, the Gosport Tube. Then the fighter leader would give the signal to alter course to intercept the enemy aircraft. It was a lengthy and complicated business. The air warning information also lacked data on the height of the enemy aircraft, but this was usually easy to work out, as most Italian bombers made their attacks either at over 12,000ft or just above sea level.



The Fleet Air Arm rarely got the best aircraft, but the Fairey Fulmar, a two-seat fighter, proved both rugged and reliable. This combined with its long range partly outweighed the Fulmar's mediocre manoeuvrability. Up to 20 Fulmars (of 803 and 807 NAS) were embarked in *Ark Royal*.

The Skua was a single-engined metal monoplane with a two-man crew (pilot and observer/rear gunner). It was meant to be both a fighter and a dive-bomber, but it wasn't particularly good in either role. As a fighter it was inferior to the more modern Axis planes it encountered, and in the bombing role its fuselage was unsuited to the stresses of dive-bombing. Peter Goodfellow, a pilot from 808 NAS, said, 'The Skua was a terrible aeroplane,' adding that it was prone to spinning in mid-air. Still, it was robust enough for deck landings, and when dive-bombing it could drop its 500lb bomb with reasonable precision, if the pilot was skilled and brave enough. On 10 April 1940, FAA Skuas from 800 and 803 NAS based at Hatston in Orkney bombed and sank the German cruiser *Konigsberg* at Bergen in Norway. This was the first time in the war that a warship had been sunk by an aircraft.

So, the Admiralty decided it would just have to do, until its replacement came along. This was the Fulmar, a two-seater monoplane fighter. It was a development of the Fairey Battle, which had been something of a disaster for the RAF, being slow and unresponsive. The Admiralty though, felt it could make better use of its slightly modified naval version. Essentially, it was a large defensive fighter used to protect the fleet itself, although it could also serve in the observation or reconnaissance roles. The Fulmar entered service in June 1940, and while it was unable to match the latest enemy fighters, it was a little faster and better armed than the Skua, and it proved rugged and robust, making it well suited to carrier operations. Still,

the Fleet Air Arm regarded it as a stop-gap fighter, until something better came along.

The Swordfish though, was loved by its crews, despite its anachronistic appearance. A biplane, with a largely canvas skin, an open cockpit and a non-retractable undercarriage, the Swordfish resembled a plane from an earlier age. It was powered by a single powerful engine, and although extremely slow it was reasonably manoeuvrable. It was seen as a safe, reliable aircraft to fly, and thanks to its large wingspan it had a sizeable payload too, allowing it to carry an 18in aerial torpedo, or up to 1,500lb of bombs mounted under its wings and fuselage. The Swordfish had a three-man crew – a pilot, an observer and a telegraphist/ air gunner, in three single-seat compartments, arrayed one behind the other. The aircraft also had a single forward-firing machine gun. Affectionately known as the 'Stringbag', the Swordfish entered service in July 1936, and so was firmly established as the FAA's TSR (Torpedo-Spotter-Reconnaissance) plane by the time *Ark Royal* joined Force H. The aircraft proved itself up to the tasks Somerville asked of it, and in its torpedo- or bomb-carrying roles remained the main striking element of Force H throughout its existence.

HOW THE FLEET OPERATED

COMMAND AND ORGANIZATION

Flag Officer Commanding, Force H

In June 1940, when Force H was created, the Admiralty appointed V. Adm. Sir James Somerville (1882–1949) as its commander. Despite his fine record, Somerville was a surprising choice: in early 1939 he had been invalided home after developing tuberculosis while serving as Commander-in-Chief, East Indies Station. He had been forcibly retired and awarded a knighthood, almost as a fop, until the outbreak of war resurrected his career. At first, he was sent to the Admiralty to advise on the introduction of naval radar into the fleet, and in May 1940 he was sent to Dover, to assist Adm. Ramsay in the organization of Operation *Dynamo*, the Dunkirk evacuation. A few weeks later he was appointed to command Force H. The Admiralty probably selected Somerville because he had the necessary rank and experience and was readily available. It turned out to be an inspired choice.

Somerville joined the navy in 1897, as a 15-year-old cadet, and by 1914 he was a lieutenant, serving as the signals officer aboard the dreadnought HMS *Marlborough*. He served with the Grand Fleet based in Scapa Flow, before being sent to the Mediterranean, where as a commander he became fleet signals officer aboard the fleet flagship, HMS *Queen Elizabeth*. In 1915 he saw action in the Dardanelles campaign aboard the force flagship the cruiser HMS *Chatham*, and was awarded a DSO and mentioned in despatches the following year. Somerville remained in the service after the war, and was promoted to captain in 1921, being given command of the dreadnought HMS *Benbow*. During the inter-war years, he ran the Admiralty Signals Department, and held a variety of commands afloat and ashore, before reaching flag rank in 1933. After serving as naval ADC to the

King, Somerville was given command of the Mediterranean Fleet's destroyers, before his promotion to vice admiral and his command in the East Indies.

V. Adm. Sir James Somerville (right), commanding Force H, and Capt. Loeben Maund (left), the captain of HMS *Ark Royal*, chatting as they pace the carrier's deck while in Gibraltar. The two men enjoyed an excellent working relationship, and together organized the bulk of Force H's Club Runs.

Somerville had a reputation of being a blunt man, who didn't suffer fools or slackers, and had a straightforward no-nonsense approach to his command. When annoyed, his language could be extremely salty. In contrast though, he had a keen sense of humour, and had a good rapport with his men, who called him 'Uncle James'. He also had a close working relationship with Adm. Cunningham, Commander-in-Chief of the Mediterranean Fleet, who he'd known since they were naval cadets together.

Somerville though, sometimes had a less harmonious relationship with his superiors in the Admiralty due to his frankness. Although this was balanced by a keen sense of duty, he was well aware that the Admiralty understood the 'bigger picture', and so rarely questioned his orders – only the way it wanted them carried out. Initially, his relationship with Prime Minister Churchill was poor, after Somerville's unwillingness to attack the Vichy French, so Churchill called for Somerville to be replaced. However, this relationship improved greatly over time, as both he and Force H repeatedly proved their worth.

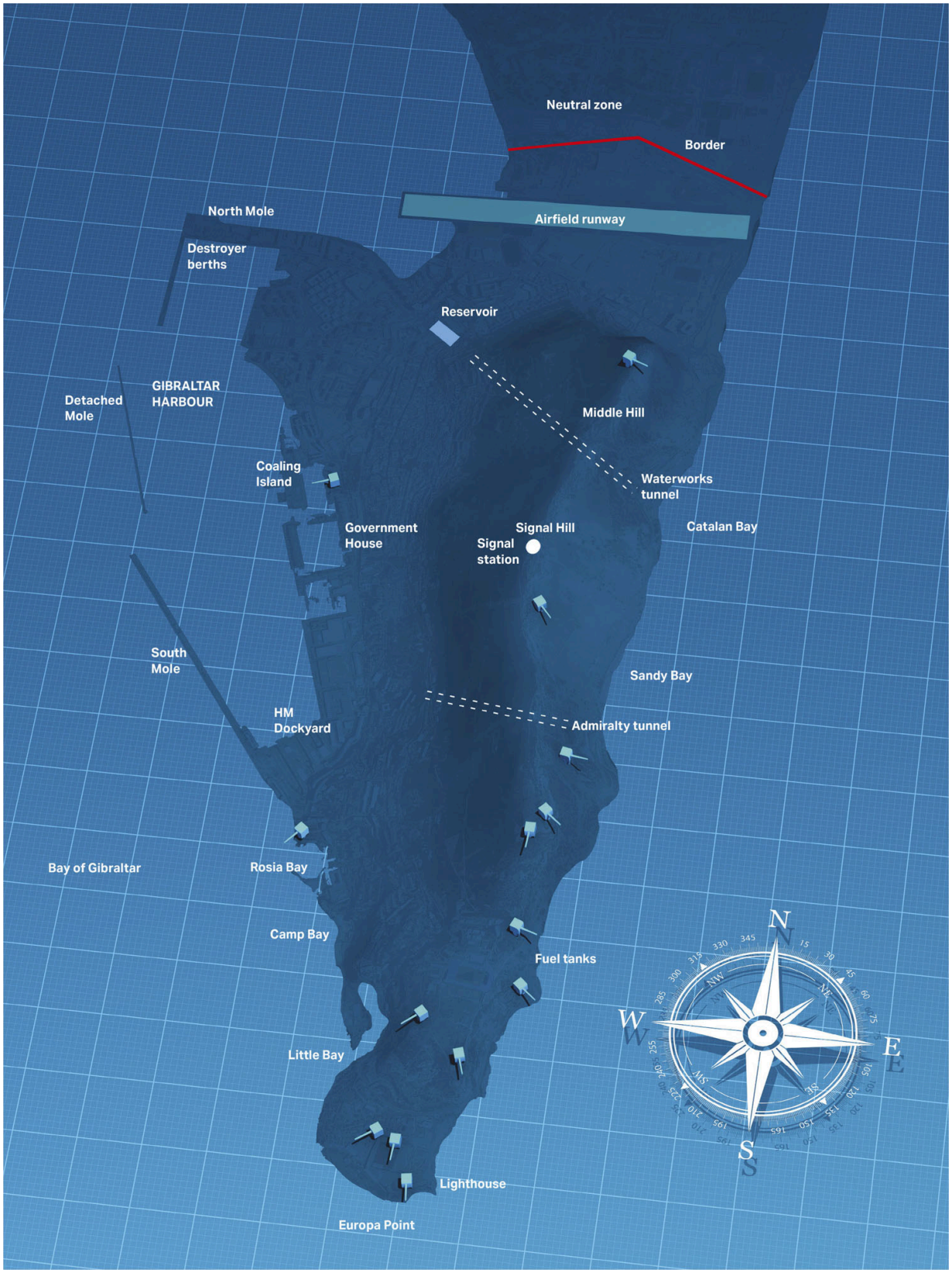
GIBRALTAR

Gibraltar, Britain's wartime bastion in the Western Mediterranean, dominated the Strait of Gibraltar, the channel between the Atlantic and the Mediterranean. This is what made it such a key strategic point, and an ideal base port for the Admiralty's naval 'fire brigade'. The British Overseas Territory of Gibraltar was tiny, just 2.5 square miles of rocky promontory, dominated by a spectacular limestone mountain, the 'Rock of Gibraltar'. On its northern side Gibraltar bordered Franco's Spain.

Vice Admiral Somerville's Force H was berthed in Gibraltar Harbour, on the western side of Gibraltar, which opened into the Bay of Gibraltar. The harbour itself was sheltered by three moles, leaving two entrances, each protected by booms. Inside, there was ample space for Somerville's force, with capital ships berthing alongside the South Mole, cruisers off Coaling Island and destroyers in their own berths on the North Mole. In the south-eastern corner of the harbour was a small dockyard, which included a dry dock large enough to take a capital ship.

Gibraltar was protected by numerous coastal batteries, many of which were in gun positions first built in the 19th century. These included 9.2in Mark IX guns, which despite being developed before World War I, were potent weapons, with a range of over 7 nautical miles. However, the main threat to Gibraltar was from the air. So, the Rock was protected by numerous AA guns, ranging from 3.7in pieces to 40mm Bofors guns, and dozens of searchlights. In addition, air warning radar was installed on the top of the Rock itself, with a range of more than 60 miles out to sea. The airfield was used by both RAF and FAA squadrons, which maintained patrols over the Strait of Gibraltar, and fighter protection for

Gibraltar and its naval base. In the event of a land or amphibious attack, Gibraltar was also garrisoned by an infantry brigade, trained to make good use of the network of tunnels, bunkers and caverns under the Rock, which allowed them to hold out almost indefinitely.


Neutral zone
Border
North Mole
Airfield runway
Destroyer berths
Reservoir
Detached Mole
GIBRALTAR HARBOUR
Middle Hill
Coaling Island
Waterworks tunnel
Government House
Signal Hill
Signal station
Catalan Bay
South Mole
Sandy Bay
HM Dockyard
Admiralty tunnel
Bay of Gibraltar
Rosia Bay
Camp Bay
Fuel tanks
Little Bay
Lighthouse
Europa Point
N
E
S
W

Command Status

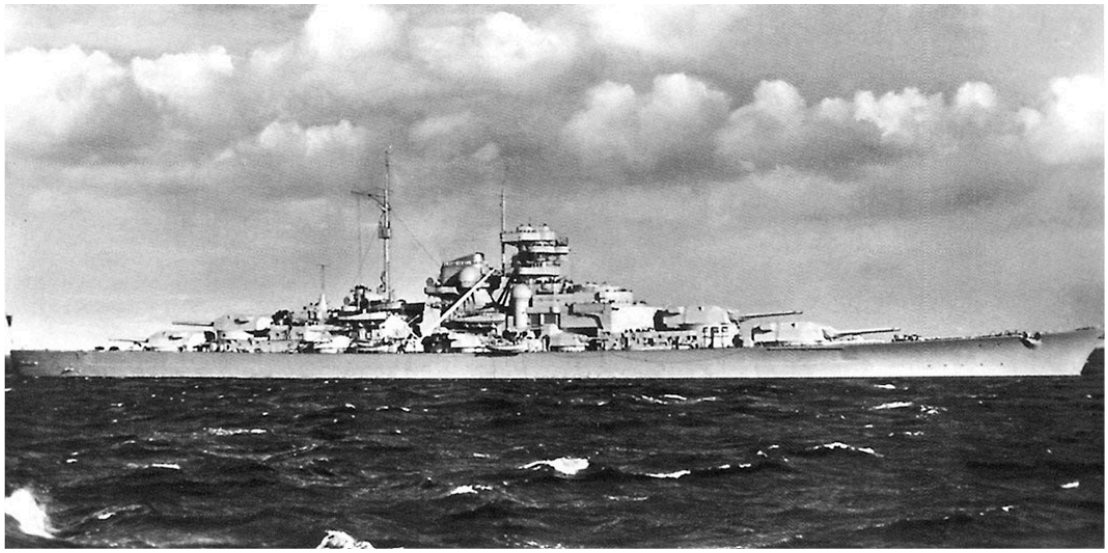
As Flag Officer Commanding Force H, Somerville held a unique position in the Royal Navy. He and his force were an anomaly. Instead of being under the control of a fleet admiral, Force H held the status of a 'detached squadron', with its commander answerable directly to the British Admiralty in London. In effect, this meant the First Sea Lord, Admiral of the Fleet Sir Dudley Pound, who held the post from June 1940 until October 1943. Pound was the professional head of the Royal Navy, and sat on the Board of Admiralty, which oversaw all naval matters. The Board's President was a political appointee, the First Lord of the Admiralty, while four more junior Sea Lords – all naval flag officers – formed the bulk of the body, together with a handful of senior civil servants, serving as Secretaries and Civil Lords of the Admiralty. During the existence of Force H, the First Lord of the Admiralty was Albert Alexander, a Labour cabinet minister in the wartime coalition government.

Somerville's status as the commander of a detached squadron was important as Gibraltar was also the base of the Flag Officer Commanding, North Atlantic Station (FOCNAS). He was responsible for guarding the sea approaches to Gibraltar, on both the Atlantic and Mediterranean sides of the Strait. In theory, his authority also incorporated the whole of the North Atlantic. In practice though, Western Approaches Command based in Liverpool had operational control of most of this area, as it controlled all convoy operations there. So, despite the grandiose title, the North Atlantic command was a relatively minor one.

When Somerville arrived in Gibraltar in June 1940, the post was held by Adm. Sir Dudley North, who had his headquarters in Gibraltar's main shore base, HMS *Cormorant*. North then, was senior to Somerville. However, like Cunningham, North had known Somerville since they were cadets, and the two Gibraltar-based admirals were good friends, and enjoyed a harmonious relationship. However, in December 1940, North was relieved, after allowing a Vichy French squadron to pass through the Strait against government and Admiralty orders. Arguably, the real reason was North's protest at the Mers-el-Kébir operation.

His replacement, who took up the post on 1 January 1941, was V. Adm. Sir Frederick Edward-Collins. He also cooperated closely with Somerville,

and the two men became good friends. By then though, the Admiralty had firmed up Somerville's status, to avoid any future discord. From the start of 1941, Edward-Collins rather than Somerville would be responsible for sealing the Strait of Gibraltar to the enemy. FOCNAS though, had limited operational naval forces at his disposal, consisting of the 11th Cruiser Squadron, the 13th Destroyer Flotilla, the 8th Submarine Flotilla and an assortment of minesweepers and other smaller vessels. Their job was to patrol the Strait, although Somerville had the Admiralty's permission to 'borrow' the 13th Flotilla's destroyers when the need arose. In return, Edward-Collins could call on Somerville's assistance when required, except when Force H was busy carrying out other Admiralty-ordered operations.



German propaganda claimed the battleship KMS *Bismarck* was unsinkable. Certainly, *Bismarck* weathered at least one direct torpedo hit amidships, during the attack by *Ark Royal*'s Swordfish late on 26 May 1941. However, another torpedo hit, on the starboard side of the battleship's rudder jammed it and made it impossible for *Bismarck* to reach the safety of Brest. The following day *Bismarck* was sunk by warships of the Home Fleet.

Given his remit, Somerville was also required to operate with the Home Fleet, which was commanded by Adm. Sir John Tovey. Any potential problems of demarcation and responsibility were avoided though, thanks to Somerville's unusual 'detached' status. During the hunt for the *Bismarck* Somerville and Tovey cooperated well, and worked together to ensure the German battleship was caught and sunk. Force H would be available for

operations in the Mediterranean, in concert with Adm. Cunningham, if agreed by the Admiralty, and could be temporarily lent to the Mediterranean Fleet if occasion demanded. Somerville though, would retain sole responsibility for Force H and its tactical deployment during operations, whether acting under Admiralty orders or if assisting Cunningham, Tovey or Edward-Collins.

In the Mediterranean, the aerial superiority enjoyed by the Axis in the Central Mediterranean meant that, in effect, the authority of the Commander-in-Chief, Mediterranean Fleet, Adm. Sir Andrew Cunningham was effectively limited to the Eastern Mediterranean. It fell to Somerville then, to maintain naval control over the Western Mediterranean. This became especially important when the need to supply and reinforce Malta became a major priority. When Cunningham and Somerville cooperated, such as during the Malta Convoy operations, this demarcation of authority helped avoid any conflict. The same, of course, was true of Tovey and Somerville, as Force H's direct line of command to the Admiralty, and Somerville's remit was now clearly defined.

Naval Staff

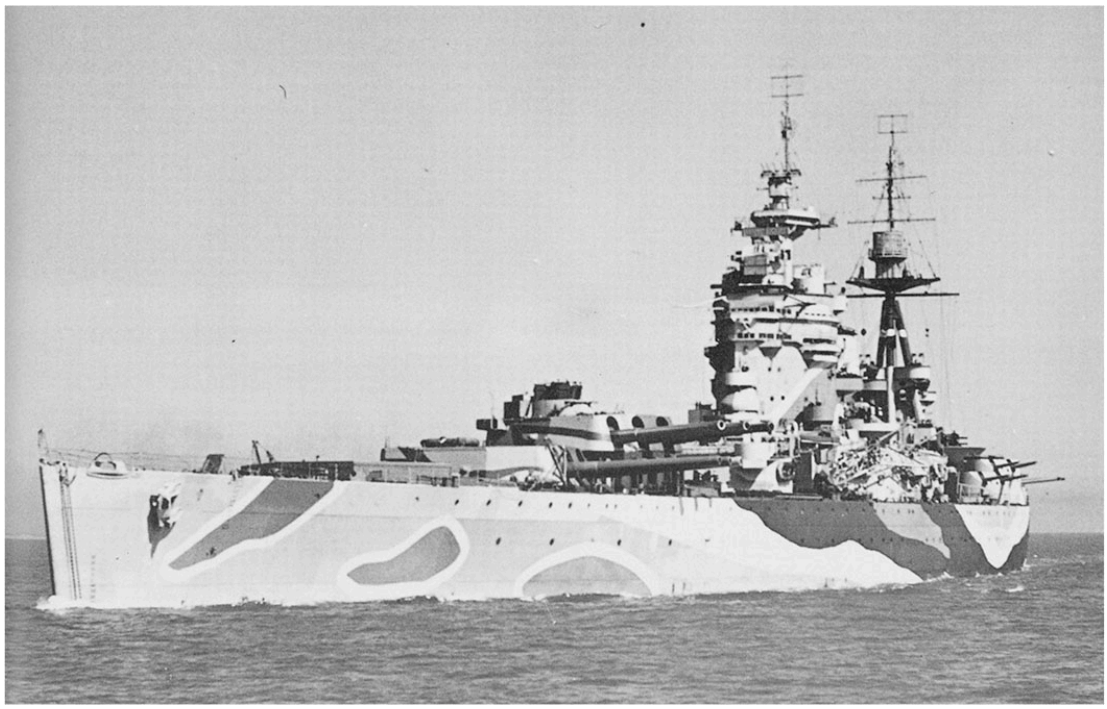
As Flag Officer Commanding, Force H, V. Adm. Somerville was assisted by a small staff. This was larger than would have been usual for what was essentially a squadron-sized formation. This was because Force H could be expanded by reinforcements for operations, which in turn required a slightly larger staff to administer it. In addition, a larger planning staff was provided, as Force H was extremely active, with one operation usually following close behind another, with deployments ranging from mid-Atlantic to the Central Mediterranean. Somerville had his own personal staff of a flag secretary and a flag lieutenant. The former was a paymaster-commander, in charge of organizing the admiral's paperwork, while the flag lieutenant, in this case a lieutenant commander skilled at signals, organized the admiral's schedule and diary. When in action, he would jot down the admiral's signals, and make sure they were sent.

In many cases the admiral's chief of staff was also his flag captain, that is the commander of his flagship. This though, would cause disruption

when the admiral moved his flag to another warship. So, in Force H the two posts were separate. Initially, the post of chief of staff was held by the highly competent Capt. Eric Jeffrey. On his death aboard the flagship *Rodney* in October 1941, he was replaced by Capt. Peveril William-Powlett, the former commander of the light cruiser *Fiji*, which had been sunk off Crete that May. The chief of staff was the admiral's deputy who made sure that the whole operational machine ran smoothly.

Under him were various branches or sections, each with its own area of responsibility. The principal of these was the operations staff, led by the staff officer (plans and ops) Cdr Anthony Buzzard. He was the real instigator of the Club Run mission and was mentioned in despatches for his planning of the Genoa operation in February 1941. In April 1941 he was earmarked for promotion, and so left to become the executive officer (second-in-command) of the battleship HMS *Rodney*. His place was taken by the aristocratic Cdr Anthony Thorold, a navigation specialist who played a major part in organizing Force H's part in the Malta Convoy operations. A lot of pressure was placed on these officers, as Force H was regularly involved in highly complex multi-faceted operations. It is a testament to their professionalism that Force H carried out its duties so well.

Also in the staff were officers capable of advising the admiral or the operations staff on technical areas of expertise. These included navigation, gunnery, torpedoes and signals. These specialist officers were usually lieutenant commanders. There was also a commander in charge of fleet maintenance, and a secretariat section of six paymaster lieutenants, who dealt with the Force's administration, reports and record-keeping. In addition to the staff officers, Somerville's staff included a number of non-commissioned men – the plotters, signallers and clerks whose work ensured the information available to Somerville was kept up to date, and that the orders of the admiral were followed without any delay.



The ageing but still powerful battleship HMS *Nelson* became Somerville's flagship on 27 July 1941. In August and September, *Nelson* led Force H during four sorties into the Western Mediterranean; an attack on Cagliari in Sardinia, two Club Runs and Operation *Halberd*, the first major Malta Convoy.

When Force H was formed, Somerville's flagship was the venerable battlecruiser HMS *Hood*. It was designed as a flagship, and so was spacious enough to accommodate the admiral's sizeable staff. However, other flagships were less suitable, and many of the more junior members of the staff were forced to find berths wherever they could, including passageways or 'flats' – open spaces between decks, including tiller, canteen and sickbay lobbies. There, curtained off spaces served as temporary berths. In a less active command, staff officers might be accommodated ashore in Gibraltar, but as Force H was usually involved in some operation or other, the staff remained close to the admiral. When Somerville moved to another flagship the staff moved too, and often the whole accommodation problem had to be dealt with all over again.

Somerville was a hard task master and demanded total commitment from his over-worked staff. However, by the end of 1940 it had welded itself into a real team, capable of dealing with the seemingly constant transmission of operational orders and plans, signals and reports. It was a

phenomenal workload though, and the strain of seemingly endless operations took its toll on the staff. However, they had complete faith in their admiral and were extremely devoted to him. In return, Somerville trusted them to turn his wishes into formal orders, and then ensure they were put into action.

The staff quickly learned that Somerville was a 'fighting captain', filled with drive, energy and aggression towards the enemy. This is reflected in the orders Somerville's staff issued in the summer of 1941, on the eve of Operation *Substance*, a highly complex Malta Convoy mission. These were issued to every ship in Force H, and those which were temporarily attached to Somerville's command. They laid out the mission – helping a seven-ship convoy reach Malta, and the need for it – without which Malta might fall. The orders warned against the showing of lights, the need for AA lookouts and outlined the threat posed by enemy torpedo-bombers. Somerville finished by emphasizing that the convoy *must* reach Malta, and stressed that to ensure this it required teamwork and a maximum effort by all the men of Force H. Somerville got both from his men, and thanks to detailed planning, everybody knew exactly what was expected of them. Somerville had no need for luck. He and his staff made their own through excellence and professionalism.

Flagship, Force H

Flagship	Period of service
HMS Hood (battlecruiser)	June–August 1940
HMS Renown (battlecruiser)	August–November 1940
HMS Ark Royal (aircraft carrier)	November 1940
HMS Renown (battlecruiser)	November 1940–July 1941
HMS Nelson (battleship)	July–September 1941
HMS Rodney (battleship)	September–November 1941
HMS Malaya (battleship)	November 1941–April 1942

INTELLIGENCE AND COMMUNICATION

Intelligence

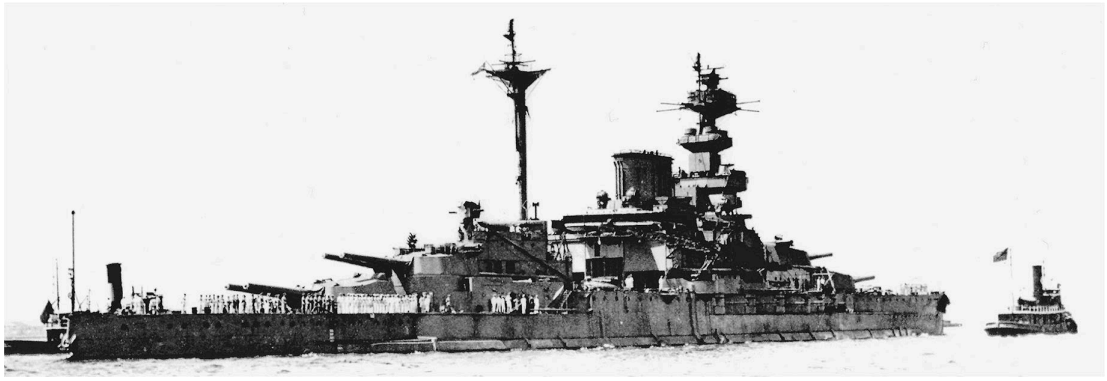
Due to the direct link between Force H and the Admiralty in London, V. Adm. Somerville had excellent access to the latest intelligence information. The Naval Intelligence Department (NID) was based in the Admiralty, and was commanded by R. Adm. John Godfrey, a highly gifted officer who relied on various sources for his information: reports by agents, interviews with prisoners of war, aerial photo reconnaissance flights, wireless traffic analysis, radio direction finding and on occasion captured enemy documents. In 1942, after falling foul of Prime Minister Churchill, Godfrey was replaced by Capt. Edmund Rushbroke. His principal assistant was Cdr Ian Fleming RNVR, later the author of the James Bond novels.

Of all these sources of information, radio intelligence proved the most fruitful. Traffic analysis involved studying the volume of enemy signals traffic, noting where it originated and where it was sent to. This could denote a build-up in naval activity, prior to a battlefleet putting to sea. Forewarned, the Navy might be able to counter the move. Radio Direction Finding (RDF) was an even better source, where enemy signals could be detected, and using warships at sea or direction-finding stations sited along a coast, the location of the sender could be pinpointed, albeit not particularly accurately, even if the signal originated in mid-Atlantic.

Still, land-based RDF equipment helped located *Bismarck* after the battleship had evaded its British pursuers in mid-Atlantic, and this encouraged the Admiralty to direct Force H into a position which intersected *Bismarck*'s most likely track to the French coast. Generally though, RDF proved largely ineffective in the Western Mediterranean due to the lack of friendly coastline. So, it was up to warships equipped with RDF equipment to triangulate the signal, and then to pass the information on to Somerville's staff.

A much greater source of intelligence was the decoding of Axis signals, giving commanders like Somerville the ability to read enemy signals traffic. Captured German Enigma coding machines were examined in Bletchley

Park, north of London, and by early 1941 it was possible to read many *Kriegsmarine* signals. Italian naval codes were also breached. This all gave Somerville, as well as Cunningham and Tovey, a fairly reliable picture of Axis naval capabilities and intentions, and so allowed these British admirals to deploy their forces or time their own operations accordingly. Ultra intercepts led to successes such as the ambush of the Italian battlefleet at Matapan; but it wasn't foolproof, and often the information was decoded too late for it to be useful. The British went to great lengths to protect the secret of Ultra codebreaking. Consequently, the Admiralty was selective in the information it passed on to Somerville and the others. The Admiralty's rule of thumb was that action shouldn't be taken based on Ultra intercepts alone.



The veteran Queen Elizabeth-class battleship HMS *Malaya* became Force H's new flagship in October 1941, after its predecessor HMS *Rodney* was recalled to the Home Fleet. *Malaya* remained Somerville's flagship until he hauled down his flag on 10 January 1942. His successor, R. Adm. Syfret, retained it as his flagship until Force H was disbanded on 1 April.

So, some other information source, such as a sighting by reconnaissance aircraft or a submarine was required before Somerville could take action. Fortunately for him, regular British submarine patrols operating from Gibraltar or Valetta were conducted off Italian naval bases. In Malta in 1940, the RAF operated a flight of Maryland Martin reconnaissance planes, which could range over the Central Mediterranean in search of enemy naval forces. Later, these would be reinforced by Sunderland flying boats and Bristol Beaufighter reconnaissance aircraft. Force H played its part too, when at sea, with *Ark Royal* or any other attached carrier launching

Swordfish on reconnaissance missions, to ensure Somerville wasn't taken by surprise.

Communication

Somerville was fully aware of the value of RDF, both for his own force and for the enemy. So, he usually demanded complete radio silence when Force H was at sea, which, after all, was his most effective means of hiding his activities from the enemy. At the time, wireless telegraphy (W/T) using encoded morse code messages was widely used by the Royal Navy, and by other branches of the armed forces. Five different frequency bands were used, but predominantly medium- and high-frequency (MF and HF) bands were the most common, operating at 300–3,000 kHz and 3,000–30,000 kHz respectively. High-frequency signals were bounced off the atmosphere, permitting the sending of signals over long distances, while medium-frequency ones were usually limited by the horizon. Generally, HF bands were used the most during this phase of the war. In addition, very high frequencies (VHF) were used when ships were within a few miles of each other, say when sailing in formation or in convoy.

By 1940 Radio Telephony (R/T) was available, permitting direct voice communication between ships. By late 1941, the American 'Talk Between Ships' TBS system became available, which was much easier to use. This was almost impossible to intercept, and so was more secure than W/T signals. Its limitation though, was its range, which was generally less than VHF radio. In Force H, all of its regular warships had several transmitters, capable of operating on LF, MF and HF bands, including low-power sets which were harder to intercept. VHF sets were also carried, and R/T or TBS telephone handsets when available. Each warship was also fitted with a bank of receivers, in a range of frequencies, which could also monitor enemy W/T traffic, and which were increasingly linked to HF/DF ('Huff-Duff') direction-finding equipment during the period from 1940 to 1942.

Force H had its own W/T wavelength on low or medium frequencies, used for inter-ship communications. These were low power and hence short-range sets, to reduce the risk of interception. An area broadcast frequency was also used so that Somerville could communicate with his

whole command at once. A low-frequency version of this was the most common one, again to reduce the risk of interception. Another high-frequency area frequency was used for communications between the force commander and his main deputies, or with other fleet commanders, such as Adm. Cunningham's flagship during Malta Convoy operations. An auxiliary wave served as a backup version of this, linking all ships in Force H of cruiser size or above.

V. Adm. Somerville, addressing the crew of HMS *Ark Royal* on the carrier's flight deck after returning to Gibraltar in the aftermath of the air strike on *Bismarck*. Force H's commander praised the whole crew for playing its part in that one torpedo hit which had doomed the German battleship and saved the honour of the Royal Navy.

Communications were vital for air operations, directing formed-up strikes towards their target, when recovering aircraft, or when maintaining contact with air formations out of sight of the carrier. For this, *Ark Royal* and any other carrier operating in concert used a Striking Force waveband,

used by fighter controllers in the carriers or increasingly in attendant AA cruisers to direct air operations. In addition, the carrier and the Force flagship alike monitored the RAF reconnaissance waveband, to coordinate search operations and the rendezvous of Club Flight formations with RAF Malta. This was a medium-frequency high-power W/T link, but generally carriers used low-power communications, to reduce exposure to radio interception.

For the most part though, Somerville was keen on maintaining radio silence whenever possible. This meant relying on flag signals, semaphore or lamp signals when warships were within sight of each other, which of course were undetectable by the enemy. Lamp signalling was slower than using flag hoists, as messages had to be spelled out. By contrast, a flag hoist could send pre-set messages, using a sequence of flags specified in a ship's signalling book. Essentially, the same flag signalling system used by Nelson was still being used by Somerville 135 years after Trafalgar. The one modification was the semaphore machine, carried in larger ships, which could send semaphore message rapidly using mechanically operated arms. Radio silence though, was all very well until a fleet was on the brink of going into action. Then, the time for deception was past, as the enemy knew where the ships were. In those cases, Somerville relied on wireless or radio to communicate his orders quickly and effectively with the ships under his command.

Deception

For all its other virtues, Gibraltar wasn't the ideal place to keep things secret. Just 4 nautical miles (4.5 land miles) to the west across Gibraltar Bay, was the Spanish port of Algeciras. From there any observer with a good pair of binoculars could watch Force H's movements, report new arrivals and witness the comings and goings of Gibraltar convoys. For an Axis spy, it was the perfect spot for ship watching. By renting a waterfront property, which many did, German or Italian spies could even do their work from home. During the war, one part of the waterfront was known by the locals as *Fila de Espías* ('Spy Row'). Algeciras had the added advantage that Franco's regime was supportive of the Axis, and while neutral, the

Spanish police happily turned a blind eye to espionage activities in the port. There was nothing the British could do but file complaints through diplomatic channels.

The Spanish port was home to numerous German *Abwehr* (military intelligence) agents, who reported directly to the *Abwehr* head attached to the German embassy in Madrid. Within minutes of any activity in Gibraltar, the news would be passed on to Madrid, and from there it would be relayed by coded signal to Berlin. As a result, each outbound Gibraltar convoy could expect U-boats to be ready and waiting for it out in the Atlantic. Similarly, every time one of Somerville's warships entered or left port, the enemy would know about it, often down to the ship's name. If the spy had a good enough vantage point, they could even watch what went on inside the harbour, as warships were refuelled, took on stores or were repaired.

The Italian military intelligence agency *Servizio Informazioni Militare* (SIM) was also active in Algeciras. By the summer of 1941, *Abwehr* observation stations had been established along the coast to the north-east and south-west and west of Gibraltar, and on the south side of the Strait at Cueta and Tangier. Another threat was the Spanish and Moroccan fishing fleets in the Strait, whose crews were paid for information on Allied ship movements.

In Gibraltar itself, the British intelligence services monitored the daytime Spanish traffic across the frontier and used it to track or intercept Axis agents and saboteurs.

It was difficult for Somerville to counter this, so precautions were taken when in port to hide whatever activity was going on aboard the Force H warships there. When Force H put to sea, various deceptions were taken to confound the spies. If Somerville's force planned to sail into the Western Mediterranean, it would often begin by heading west into the Atlantic, before reversing course when out of sight of land. It would then make the run through the Strait under cover of darkness, and by dawn would be well into the Western Mediterranean. The same procedure was often followed in reverse when Force H sortied into the Atlantic. Another ruse was to sail in two groups, with each one going in a different direction, before reforming into a single body during the night.

Similarly, reinforcements or convoys approaching Gibraltar after sailing there from Britain might continue on through the Strait, at night, and then

double back to appear from the Mediterranean side at dawn. Occasionally, just to sow confusion, small warship groups or convoys would leave Gibraltar, do the same nocturnal doubling back, and return to Gibraltar the following day from the opposite direction, often after repainting their ship or otherwise altering their appearance. When a troopship arrived in Gibraltar, bound for Malta or Alexandria, the soldiers were often kept below decks, or had the numbers allowed on deck limited, to avoid the watchers discovering that the newly arrived merchantman had troops embarked.

Another form of deception practised by Somerville in Operation *Spark*, during Force H's first Club Run in July 1940, was to send the cruiser *Enterprise* into a part of the Western Mediterranean far from his own operating area. It would then generate a lot of signals traffic, suggesting that the whole of Force H was accompanying it near the Balearic Islands, rather than flying-off aircraft from a point to the south-west of Sardinia. This though, placed the decoy ship in extreme danger, and Somerville thought better of repeating the deception.

LOGISTICS AND FACILITIES

Force H's operating base was Gibraltar, the British-owned promontory bordering Spain, near the country's southernmost point. This little triangle-shaped rocky piece of territory was only 3 miles long, and while a little over a mile across at its widest point, it tapered down to its southern tip, Europa Point. The Rock of Gibraltar dominated this promontory, a 1,400ft-high limestone crag with a virtually sheer face on its eastern or Mediterranean side, with a slightly gentler slope on its western aspect, where it loomed over Gibraltar town and its harbour.

Beyond the harbour was Gibraltar Bay, a commodious anchorage for convoys and warships alike, some 4 miles across and the same deep. On its seaward side it was protected by a boom to deter torpedo boats, as well as submarine nets. This was patrolled by warships and covered by coastal batteries sited close to Europa Point. Gibraltar Harbour itself was protected by three moles. The 'L-shaped' North Mole emerged from the north side of the town and ran east before doglegging to the south. It incorporated the destroyer pens. About one and three quarters of a mile to the south, near

Rosia Bay, the mile-long South Mole ran toward the north-west, to protect the dockyard. That left a gap of three quarters of a mile between the seaward ends of the two moles, running north-south. It was enclosed by a third Detached Mole, half a mile long, which blocked the entrance to the harbour, creating two channels, one to the north and the other to the south. These formed the only possible entrances into the harbour, and during the war they were protected by more booms and torpedo nets. The result was a very secure harbour one and a half miles long from north to south, but just 750yds across at its widest point – by the northern entrance.

Soldiers from the Black Watch, on garrison duty in Gibraltar, take the chance to look at shipping in Gibraltar Bay, from the summit of 'The Rock'. On the left is part of the North Mole, while to the right, beyond the western tip of the airfield runway is the Spanish border.

THE ATLANTIC OCEAN, 1940–42

Convoy designations
HX (Fast Convoy): Halifax to Liverpool
SC (Slow Convoy): Halifax to Liverpool
OG (Outward): Liverpool to Gibraltar
HG (Homeward): Gibraltar to Liverpool
OS (Outward): Liverpool to Sierra Leone
SL Sierra Leone to Liverpool
60° W
50° W
40° W
30° W
20° W
10° W
0°
60° N
50° N
40° N
30° N
20° N
10° N
0°
ICELAND
GREENLAND
CANADA
LABRADOR
NEWFOUNDLAND
St. John's
Halifax
HX & SC
Scapa Flow
GREAT BRITAIN
OG & OS
IRELAND
Liverpool
London
English Channel
Bismarck torpedoed, May 1941
FRANCE
Bay of Biscay
Bordeaux
HG
SPAIN
Gibraltar
Strait of Gibraltar
Casablanca
MOROCCO
Madeira
AZORES
NORTH ATLANTIC OCEAN
Bermuda
CANARY IS.
WESTERN SAHARA
SL
CAPE VERDE IS.
MAURITANIA
Cape Verde
Dakar
GUINEA
Freetown
GHANA
WEST INDIES
Trinidad
GUYANA
SURINAME
N
0
200 nautical miles
0
200km

The Rock itself, towering above the harbour, sheltered the ships there from easterly winds, but the harbour was exposed to south-westerlies. Usually, when Force H was in harbour, the flagship, usually *Renown*, would berth alongside the centre of the southern mole, while the carrier *Ark Royal* would be tied up ahead of the flagship, at the south-eastern end of the mole, near the dockyard. The cruiser *Sheffield*'s usual berth was across on the landward side of the harbour at the old Coaling Island quay, close to Government House. Somerville's destroyers were berthed in the Destroyer Pens at the North Mole, as were the older vessels of the 13th Destroyer Flotilla.

The air defences of Gibraltar put to the test in early 1942. Searchlights sighted to overlook Gibraltar Harbour pierce the evening sky, augmenting the ones at the ends of the North and South Moles. Gibraltar, as well as the fleet base, was exceptionally well protected by anti-aircraft guns, air warning radar and other air defences. The principal threat during this period was the Vichy French bombers based in French North Africa.

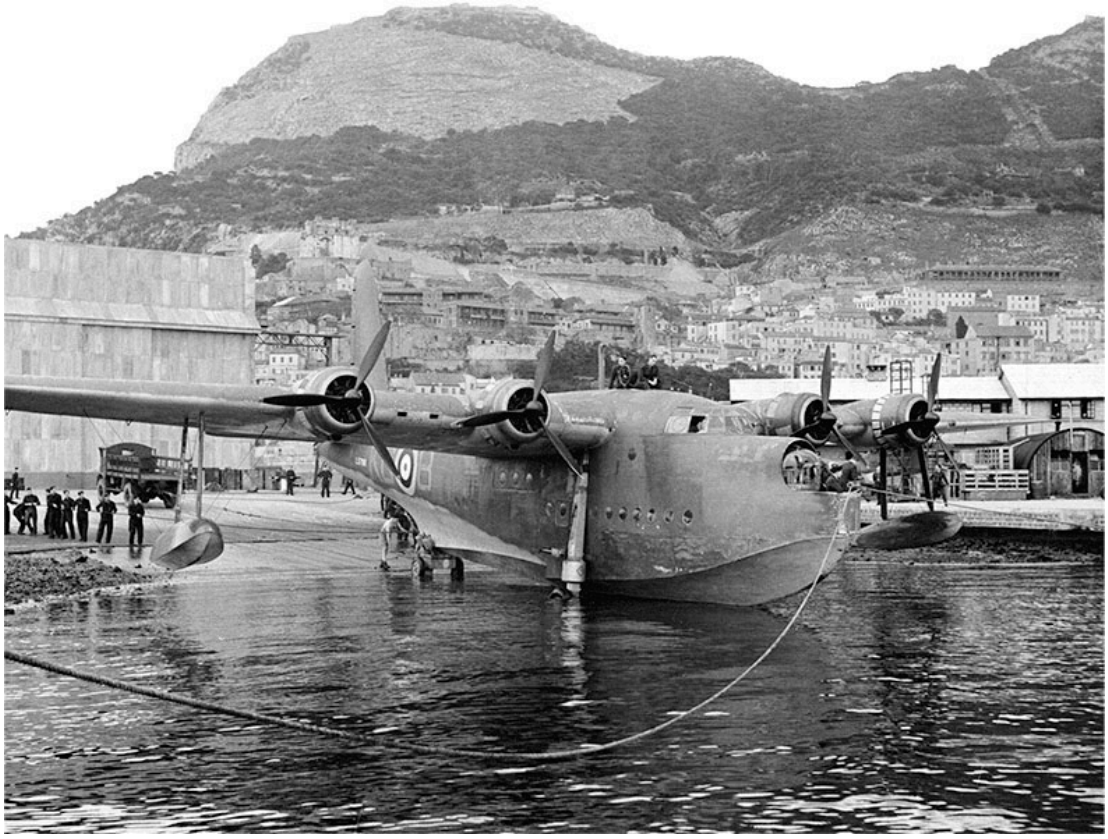
There was room on the South Mole for at least one other capital ship, but any others would have to anchor outside the harbour in Gibraltar Bay. If required, one or two cruisers and several small escort vessels could berth alongside on the landward side of the harbour, near the dockyard and signal tower, or near the slipway at the harbour's northern end, which was the

civilian, commercial part of the harbour, or else in the few remaining spaces alongside the North Mole. If not moored alongside, for instance if under threat of air attack, the warships could be moored just off their usual berths, at head and stern buoys.

The dockyard itself was large enough to provide at least temporary (or 'seagoing') repairs to most ships, to allow them to continue their voyage to a larger dockyard. Still, Gibraltar's dockyard included three dry docks, one of which, after its recent extension, could accommodate capital ships. A cruiser or destroyer could fit in the middle one, but the third and smallest dry dock, on the inner or eastern side of the dockyard was only large enough for small escort vessels to fit inside.

Gibraltar itself was heavily defended. In the summer of 1940, it was garrisoned by the Gibraltar Defence Force, a territorial (or reserve) formation which manned the coastal batteries and anti-aircraft positions which were dotted around Gibraltar. Four regular infantry battalions were stationed in Gibraltar, together with detachments of Royal Artillery, Royal Engineers and other formations. In all, some 15,000 troops were garrisoned there. Many were housed in the labyrinth of tunnels cut into the limestone by generations of engineers. These miles of caverns and tunnels included defensive emplacements and ammunition storage, but for the most part these were used to provide a secure underground base.

This included barracks capable of housing over 15,000 men; a generating station, a field hospital with an operating theatre and bed space for 200 patients; vehicle parks and repair facilities; food storage and freezer space to provision both the garrison and the inhabitants for well over a year, as well as underground bakeries, a telephone exchange, broadcasting and wireless communication stations and a water treatment plant. In fact the steep eastern face of the Rock acted as a catchment area for rainwater, which was stored in underground tanks, designed to provide the whole of Gibraltar with fresh water.



A Short Sunderland flying boat of Coastal Command, being prepared for launch at the Gibraltar slipway just beyond the North Mole. These cumbersome but thoroughly reliable aircraft had a range of over 1,500 nautical miles, and flew regular anti-submarine and maritime patrol missions over the Strait of Gibraltar, and provided cover for Force H operations in the Western Mediterranean and the Atlantic.

Gibraltar's wartime defences included a coastal battery of 9.2in guns, as well as 20 3.7in AA guns and smaller calibre weapons, as well as searchlights. These defences were expanded as the war went on, and by the spring of 1941 the AA defences of Gibraltar had doubled. Work also continued on the tunnel network and the landward defences. Somerville however, had little use for all of this, as very little of this underground space was allocated for naval use, and the defences of the facilities within the harbour were left to the navy to sort out. After the spring of 1941 though, when Lord Gort took over the post of governor, the two men worked together to improve the defences of the harbour and adjacent bay, as well as the rest of Gibraltar. As for the bay, the Flag Officer, Gibraltar was responsible for maintaining the boom defences, supported by anti-submarine and minesweeping patrols beyond the harbour, as well as

boarding patrols in the Strait. By early 1941 these were augmented by flying boat sweeps, operating from the Gibraltar airfield.

The airfield itself began life as a racecourse, on the flat northern end of Gibraltar, beside the Spanish border. It was briefly used as a grass airfield in the 1930s, but it was 1934 before the Admiralty decided to develop the site into a naval airfield. It opened in 1936, for use by the FAA in emergencies. However, in 1939 it was taken over by the RAF, who extended it, creating a hard concrete runway, which was fully operational by mid-1940. By the time Force H came into being it was used by both the RAF and the FAA, who maintained reconnaissance and anti-submarine patrols over the Strait and surrounding waters. Space was limited though, and so in 1942 the airfield was expanded by cutting into the northern base of the Rock itself. Today the site is Gibraltar Airport, whose mile-long runway, first developed in 1942–43, extends into Gibraltar Bay at its western end. Force H used the airfield to service its aircraft, and to serve as the collection point for Club Runs to Malta.

The logistical challenge of keeping Force H supplied was helped by Gibraltar being an assembly port for both outward- and homeward-bound convoys. The outward-bound convoys (OG) on the Gibraltar Run brought out personnel, stores and essentials from Britain, and while many of these laden ships would then continue to Sierra Leone, and then on around Africa to the Suez Canal, others were destined for Gibraltar or used the port as a final assembly point for the dangerous westward run through the Mediterranean to Malta. By 1942, the struggle to safeguard Malta became the dominant theme of Force H's operations, fighting these convoys through in the face of heavy Axis attacks.

The homeward-bound convoys from Gibraltar (HG) should have been safer. Here, ships arrived in Gibraltar from a range of other ports such as Sierra Leone or South America, and then formed up into an HG convoy for the two-week voyage from Gibraltar to Liverpool. However, following the fall of France these convoys had to pass through waters within easy reach of the German U-boat bases on the French Atlantic coast. To make things worse, they were also within range of German FW-200 Condor maritime patrol aircraft, based outside Bordeaux, which would locate and then shadow a convoy, passing sighting reports on to the *Kriegsmarine*'s U-boat command based at Lorient. During 1941, Allied merchant shipping losses

mounted steadily on both the OG and HG convoys, despite the Royal Navy allocating whatever scant resources it had to their protection. It was only in the aftermath of Convoy HG-76, which sailed from Gibraltar in mid-December 1941, that the tide began to turn, thanks to more aggressive anti-submarine tactics and the introduction of escort carriers, which could counter the threat posed by the Condors.

THE STRAIT OF GIBRALTAR

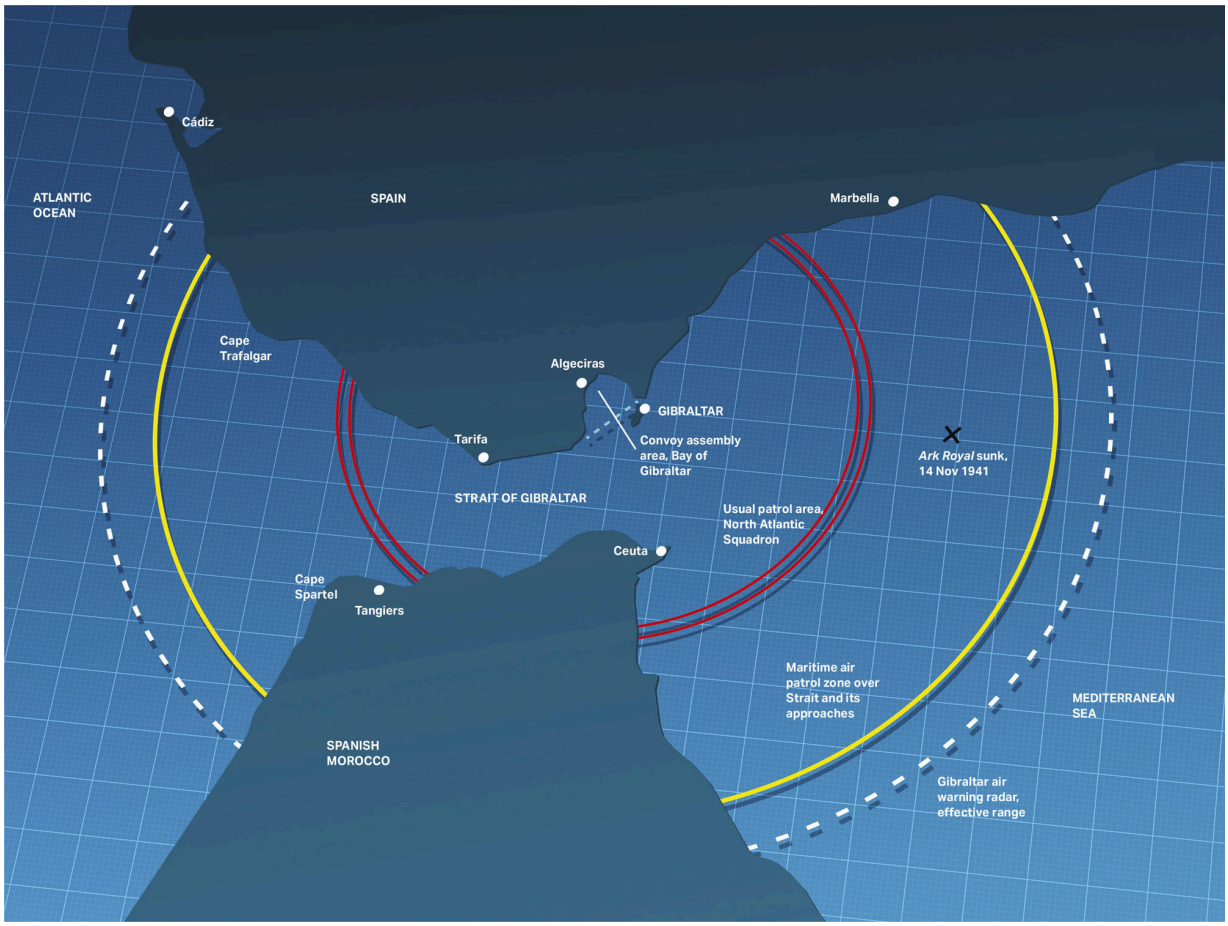
The Strait of Gibraltar is a relatively narrow channel of sea linking the Atlantic and the Mediterranean. At the same time, it also divides Europe from Africa. Europa Point, the southernmost tip of Gibraltar, was just 12 nautical miles from Cueta, in Spanish North Africa, while at its narrowest point, between Tarifa and the coast of Spanish Morocco, it was just under 8 miles across. On the European shore, Gibraltar bordered Spain, a country which was broadly sympathetic to Britain's Axis enemies, and so the Spanish protectorate on the North African shore could also be viewed as generally unfriendly to the Allied cause. The same was true of the former French protectorate around Tangier, which was occupied by the Spanish in June 1940.

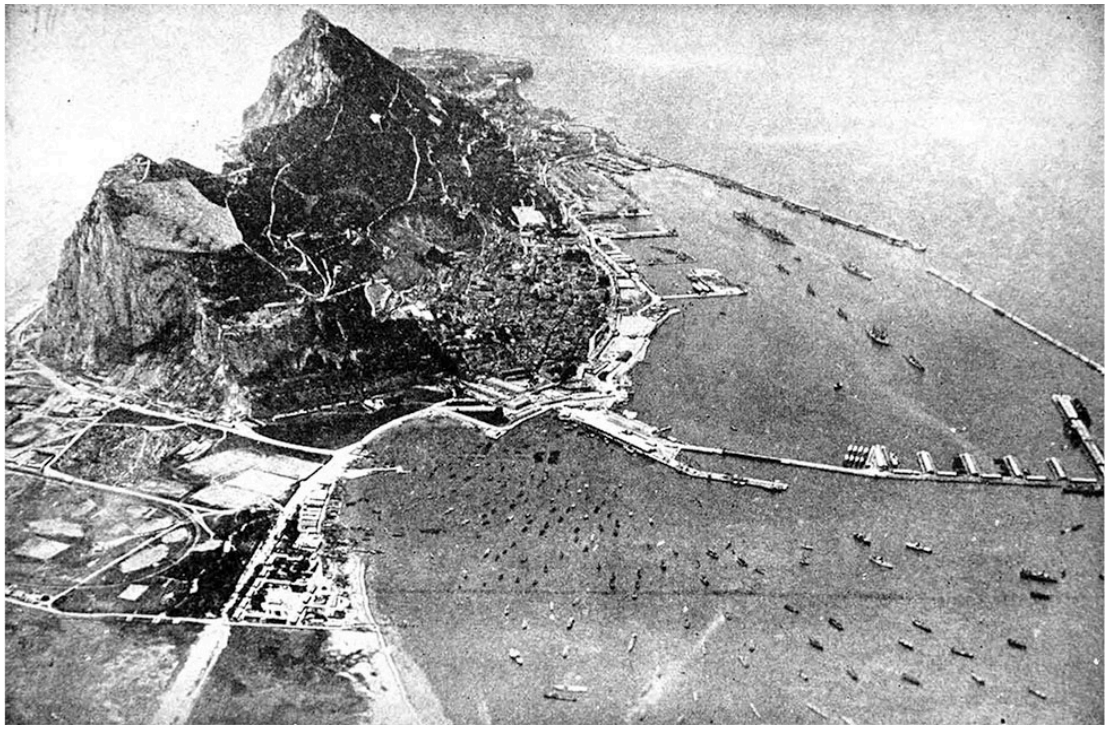
Vice Admiral Somerville saw the closure of the Strait of Gibraltar to enemy shipping as Force H's most important role. As he put it: 'no other demands for the force, such as raiding the Italian coasts, should be allowed to endanger the fulfilment of this primary object'. He qualified this slightly though, by adding 'unless it was reasonably certain that such operations would be justified by the results likely to be achieved'. In other words, preventing the Italian and German navies from joining forces, either in the Atlantic or the Mediterranean, was crucial to the success of the naval war in European waters.

Fortunately for Somerville, Gibraltar was also the head-quarters of the Flag Officer Commanding the North Atlantic Station (FOCNAS). His 13th Destroyer Flotilla, supported by a small collection of cruisers, was also responsible for blocking the Strait and its approaches to enemy vessels, including submarines. To this end, this force was occasionally supported by other naval units, usually the close escorts or hunting groups attached to Gibraltar convoys. While Somerville could leave this job to these local forces, FOCNAS lacked the strength to oppose a determined sortie by larger Axis warships. This then, was what

Somerville was prepared for – Force H stood ready to counter any attempted enemy sortie by larger warships through these waters, either from the east or the west.

Just as importantly, as Gibraltar was a gathering point for regular homebound (HG) convoys, or the destination for outward-bound (OG) ones, the safety of these convoys in the Strait was considered a vital task. This became especially so after September 1941, when German U-boats began to enter the Mediterranean. Their transit of the Strait was usually undertaken on the surface, at night. This though, was largely a one-way trip, as the strong eastward-flowing surface current in the Strait made it almost impossible for a U-boat to make the transit back into the Atlantic. These German U-boats proved far more effective than their Italian counterparts, sinking British warships in the Mediterranean. This led to the most devastating blow suffered by Force H – the torpedoing and sinking of the aircraft carrier *Ark Royal* by U-81.





The Rock of Gibraltar and Gibraltar Harbour in the 1930s, before the airstrip was built on the site of the racecourse (bottom left). This image provides an excellent view of the harbour's layout, with the North Mole in the foreground and the small dockyard in its upper-left corner.

Force H relied on these OG convoys to bring out the spare machinery and parts, the fuel, weaponry, ammunition and manpower it needed to function. The convoys also brought mail, provisions and provided a conduit for the transfer of personnel, either joining their ships or returning home for leave, training or a new deployment. The HG convoys did the same in reverse, and in both convoy routes, warships steaming to or from Gibraltar, say for refit in British shipyards or to reinforce Force H, often accompanied these convoys, making use of the convoy's escort vessels to protect them from U-boats. For the most part this well-oiled convoy system was administered by Western Forces Command, based in Liverpool. However, when within his purview the convoy came under the control of the Flag Officer, Gibraltar, which from 1 January 1941 also went by the title of Flag Officer, North Atlantic.

The Axis Threat

In 1940–41, Gibraltar faced a range of threats from Axis powers; the Germans had drawn up an invasion plan codenamed Operation *Felix* which involved airborne and amphibious forces, while the Italian air force remained a persistent threat, as to a lesser extent did the Vichy French. The Germans had planned to launch Operation *Felix* in January 1941, but plans for the invasion of Russia superseded it, so this potentially risky operation was quietly abandoned. If it had gone ahead, supported by the Vichy French and the Italians, then, if successful, it would have denied the British access to the Western Mediterranean, which in turn would have paved the way for the fall of Malta and the possible German occupation of the Azores as a forward base for use in the battle of the Atlantic.

Another threat lay across the border in Spain, where Generalissimo Franco was a natural ally of the other fascist powers. Both the German and Italian regimes wanted Franco to join them, but despite repeated requests the Spanish dictator maintained his neutrality. Possibly the swift British action to neutralize the Vichy French fleet encouraged Franco to stay his hand. So, Spain remained a neutral power, albeit one which leaned heavily towards the Axis. If Spain had joined the Axis pact and declared war against Britain, Gibraltar would have been hard pressed. Both the dockyard and the airfield were within range of Spanish guns, while less than 12 nautical miles away to the south in Spanish African Cueta, coastal batteries posed a threat to Allied shipping passing through the Strait. Fortunately for the British, this threat never materialized. The entry of the United States into the war, and the problems Germany encountered in Russia, helped ensure Spain remained an ‘unfriendly neutral’.

In the end, the Italian and Vichy French threats proved less dangerous than had first been feared. Eight small and ineffectual Italian air raids took place during this period, with most of them taking place in the summer months of 1940 and 1941. No damage was caused to Force H. In fact, it was the Vichy French who proved the most troublesome. In September 1940, and twice in early 1941, Force H was forced to ‘clear harbour’ (put to sea), in response to the threat of French air raids on Gibraltar launched from French North Africa. In October 1940, the Italian Navy launched a ‘human torpedo’ attack on ships in Gibraltar Bay. One of the three manned

torpedoes breached the bay's defences, but the attack failed, and no damage was caused. Another attempt in May 1941 also failed to achieve anything, but on 10 September three more human torpedoes sank three merchant ships in Gibraltar Bay. Fortunately for Somerville, Force H was at sea at the time, carrying out a Club Run in the Western Mediterranean. On his return, he demanded improvements be made to the bay's defences.

Life in Wartime Gibraltar

Gibraltar should have been an enjoyable port for the crews of Force H's warships. After all, it was considerably warmer than Scapa Flow, the wartime base of the Home Fleet, and it had most of the facilities a sailor wanted for a 'run ashore' (night on the town). However, sailors who expected a sunnier version of Portsmouth were sadly disappointed. In May 1940, orders were given for the evacuation of all women, children and non-combatants from Gibraltar. So, from the inception of Force H, Gibraltar was an almost entirely male town, the only females remaining being service personnel such as the Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS or 'Wrens'), nursing staff in the hospital or the Spanish women employed as housekeepers, who returned across the border before the evening curfew at 2100hrs. This same curfew also brought an end to visits to one of Gibraltar's numerous pubs or the cinema. So, in respect of social amenities, life for the sailor in Force H wasn't that much different from his counterparts in Scapa Flow.

Gibraltar Harbour, pictured during a major fleet exercise shortly before the war. In the foreground, beyond Coaling Island, is the cruiser anchorage, while beyond it lie several capital ships, including HMS *Hood*. On the far side of Gibraltar Bay is the Spanish port of Algeciras, home to a bustling community of Axis spies and saboteurs.

Of course, apart from the climate, there were a few advantages to Gibraltar. There were pubs, canteens, shops and cinemas to go to, at least before the curfew, and off Gibraltar's Main Street there was even a red-light district of sorts, populated by female Spanish day workers. Gibraltar boasted well-developed sports facilities, so inter-ship games of football, rugby or cricket were commonplace. Swimming parties were popular too, especially if some Wrens or nurses could come, and on the eastern side of the Rock, accessed through a tunnel underneath it, the water of the Mediterranean was noticeably warmer than it was in Gibraltar Bay. Even there, rowing and sailing practice and inter-ship competitions were popular.

For those with family at home, shopping for 'rabbits' (souvenirs) was essential, as Gibraltar's shops offered a range of items considered luxuries in Britain such as chocolate, silk stockings and perfume, imported from Spain. Cigarettes and Spanish wine were both cheap and relatively plentiful, as Gibraltar had no rationing, but other goods such as beer which had to

come from home were usually in short supply. The Spanish equivalent was much less appealing. Then as now, Gibraltar provides the British visitor with much that is familiar from home, mixed with the more exotic, brought there from Spain and North Africa. Somerville was very attentive to the needs of his men and realized that service aboard a warship based in Gibraltar had its drawbacks, especially when, compared to the men of the Home Fleet, there was considerably less chance of leave.

Still, to some extent this was countered by the warships having a more active operational schedule than those serving in home waters. Force H's warships were frequently at sea, often in potentially hostile waters. Under Somerville's command there was a chance that these warships could encounter the enemy virtually as soon as they put to sea, and arguably they saw more action than many other units of the Royal Navy during this period. Somerville demanded thorough professionalism from the men he led, and they were honed by this regular exposure to danger, which helped build up the strong collective pride felt by those in Force H. This process would begin within days of Force H's creation, when these warships left Gibraltar on their first mission – the neutralization of the potent threat posed by the Vichy French fleet based at Mers-el-Kébir, outside the Algerian port of Oran.

COMBAT AND ANALYSIS

THE FLEET IN COMBAT

Force H undertook a wide range of missions during its existence. These ranged from long-term ones, such as its support for the Malta Convoys or Club Runs – the delivery of aircraft to Malta, to small patrols or sweeps in either the Atlantic or the Western Mediterranean. The first of these missions, Operation *Catapult*, took place within a few days of the force's creation. The following narrative provides a little more detail on the most significant of these missions.

Mers-el-Kébir

When Somerville arrived in Gibraltar on 30 June, and hoisted his flag in *Hood*, he initiated a series of planning meetings to lay out the basics of possible operations against the Vichy French fleet based at Mers-el-Kébir near Oran in French Algeria. All of his senior commanders opposed the use of force, but it soon became clear that both the Admiralty and the British government felt that a peaceful solution had become unlikely. Somerville put to sea on 2 July in *Hood*, accompanied by the battleships *Resolution* and *Valiant*, the carrier *Ark Royal*, two cruisers and ten destroyers. They were preceded to sea by the destroyer *Foxhound*, bearing Capt. Holland, commander of *Ark Royal*, a former naval attaché in Paris who would act as Somerville's negotiator.

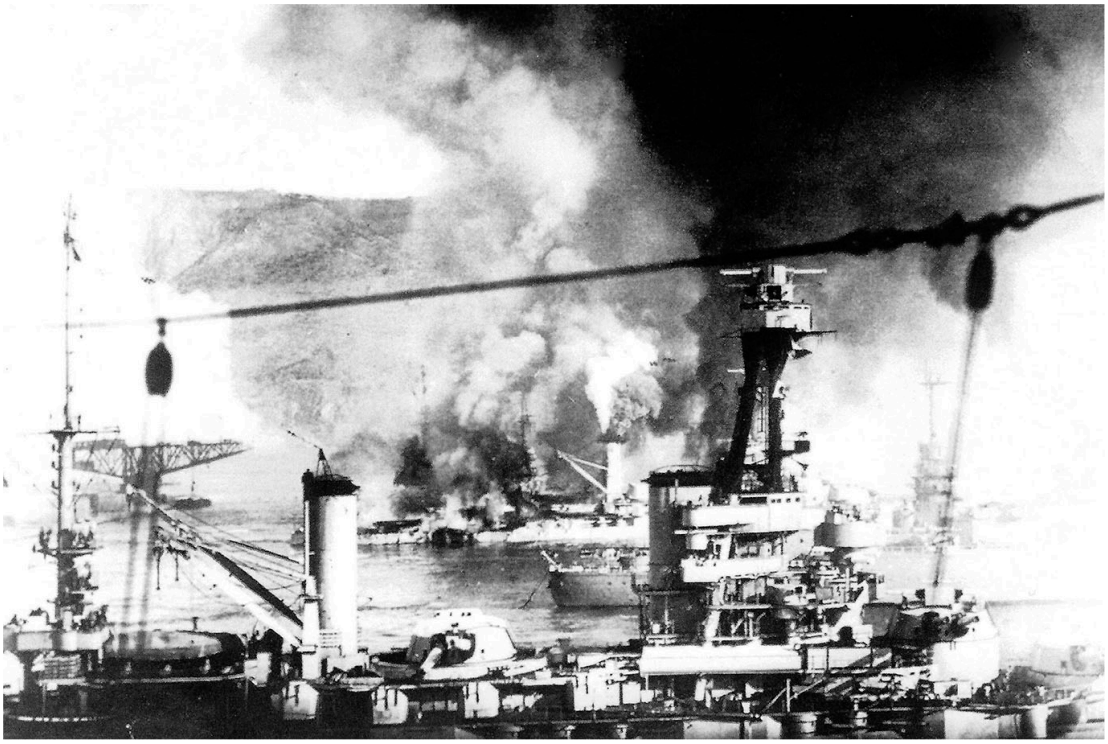
Adm. Darlan, commanding the French fleet was a member of Marshal Pétain's Vichy French cabinet, and so was unlikely to conclude a deal which contravened Pétain's wishes. At Mers-el-Kébir, 3 miles west of Oran, Darlan commanded the modern battleships *Dunkerque* and *Strasbourg*, the older ones *Bretagne* and *Provence*, a seaplane carrier and six destroyers. Negotiations began on 3 July, by which time the Admiralty had ordered Somerville to present an ultimatum with four options; join the British as allies, sail into internment in a British or West Indies port or scuttle the fleet. A six-hour deadline was given – failure by the

French to choose one of these options would result in hostilities. Meanwhile, Force H cruised offshore.

The Vichy French fleet at anchor at Mers-el-Kébir, the French naval base just to the east of Oran in French Algeria. The third and fifth warships from the left were the two modern capital ships *Dunkerque* and *Strasbourg*, which the British were determined shouldn't fall into German hands. Neutralizing them lay at the heart of Operation *Catapult*.

Darlan delegated any negotiations to a subordinate, Adm. Gensoul, but it soon became clear that the French were preparing their ships for action. On notifying the Admiralty, Somerville was ordered to lay mines outside the harbour, to prevent the French from leaving port. Just before 1230hrs on Wednesday 3 July, Gensoul notified Somerville that he intended to put to sea, and fight if he had to. Somerville ordered *Ark Royal*'s Swordfish to drop five mines across the harbour entrance, but still hoped that negotiations would bear fruit, and extended the deadline to 1500hrs. Still, a Skua escorting the Swordfish was shot down, with the loss of both crewmen – the first casualties of the operation. Twenty minutes before this new deadline expired Gensoul indicated he wanted to negotiate further, and so Capt. Holland resumed talks. However, the French continued to prepare their ships for action, and the Admiralty, on learning that six French cruisers were on their way from Algiers, pressed Somerville to settle things quickly.

Still, Gensoul's prevarication continued, and at 1723hrs Holland, returning to *Foxhound*, reported that the French ships had gone to 'action stations'. By then it was clear that the French were simply stalling, hoping to call the British bluff. Somerville's patience had been exhausted, and he ordered *Ark Royal* to launch strike aircraft, and his other capital ships to prepare to engage. At 1754hrs, when no more communications had come from Gensoul, Somerville ordered *Hood*, *Resolution* and *Valiant* to open fire. The British capital ships were just under 9 miles to the north-west of the harbour, and their fire was guided by spotter planes. Over the next ten minutes 36 15in shells were fired. In that time, *Dunkerque* and *Provence* had been badly damaged, and had been run aground, while the battleship *Bretagne* had blown up, with the loss of most of her crew.



The aftermath of Force H's bombardment of the Vichy French fleet at Mers-el-Kébir on 5 July 1940. The battleship *Bretagne* blew up and sank, with the loss of almost 1,000 crew, while *Provence* and *Dunkerque* were both badly damaged. Only the modern battleship *Strasbourg* avoided the carnage. Somerville felt ashamed by his part in this action, despite its political and military necessity.

The only French capital ship to escape was *Strasbourg*, which slipped out of harbour, escorted by three destroyers. The ships bypassed the mines, and brushed off a Swordfish dive-bombing attack, which cost the British two biplanes. After a brief fight, the faster French battleship made its escape and reached Toulon the

following day. The same evening Force H arrived back in Gibraltar. On 6 July *Ark Royal* carried out another strike on Mers-el-Kébir, to finish off *Dunkerque*. The French battleship was badly crippled in the attack and remained *hors de combat* until early 1942, when *Dunkerque* also sailed to Toulon. The Vichy French government was outraged at this example of what they viewed as British perfidy. However, the whole sorry affair could have been avoided had Darlan and Gensoul been forthright and shown willingness in negotiating a peaceful solution.

Menace and Ration

Other French naval detachments in British and Egyptian ports had either been seized or had agreed to their disarmament. That still left the Vichy French naval group at Dakar in French West Africa at large. It consisted of the uncompleted battleship *Richelieu*, two cruisers, four destroyers and three submarines. *Richeleu*, however, had been immobilized in early July by Swordfish operating from the British carrier *Hermes*. After attempts by the Free French to persuade the Vichy French there to join them proved fruitless, the Admiralty decided to act more decisively. In August 1940, Operation *Menace* was devised, which would centre around an Anglo-French landing at Dakar. This was to be supported by a powerful naval group, Force M, led by V. Adm. Cunningham. In early September, Somerville was ordered to send the battleships *Barham* and *Resolution*, the carrier *Ark Royal* and eight destroyers to reinforce Cunningham.

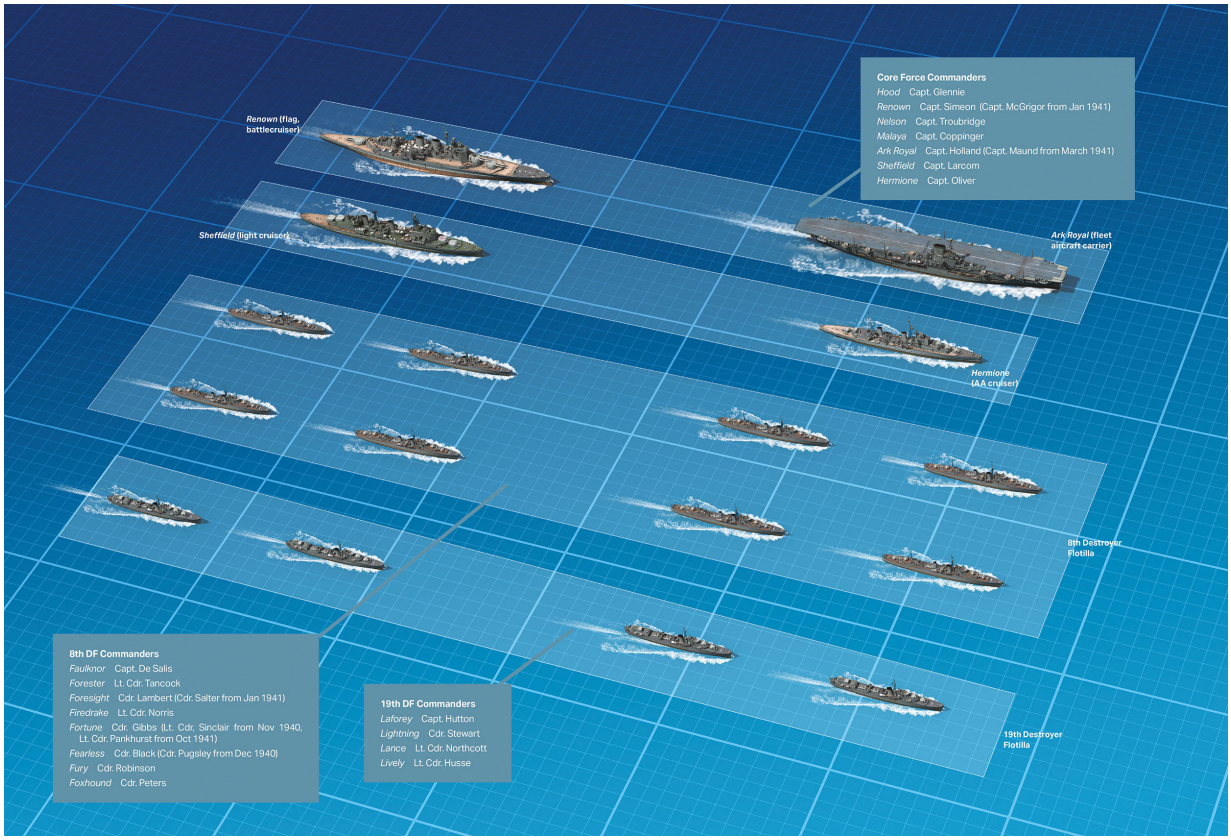
FORCE H COMPOSITION (overleaf)

From August 1940 until August 1941, the composition of Force H centred around a core of a dozen warships. From time to time though, these were unavailable due to refits, repairs or temporary deployment for other duties. Similarly, other warships temporarily joined Force H for certain operations. This was particularly true of the ships of the 13th Destroyer Flotilla, which were regularly seconded from the North Atlantic Station, as they were based in Gibraltar.

Before August 1940, the force flagship was the battlecruiser *Hood*. At the same time, *Sheffield* replaced the light cruisers *Arethusa* and *Enterprise*, and the destroyers *Fury* and *Firedrake* arrived from home waters to reinforce the 8th Destroyer Flotilla. *Hermione* replaced *Sheffield* in June 1941. The destroyer *Escort* was also attached to the 8th Destroyer Flotilla, but she was sunk on 11 July 1940.

Also available when required was the 13th Destroyer Flotilla (Lt Cdr Heywood-Lonsdale), part of the North Atlantic Squadron, based in Gibraltar. In 1940–41 *Keppel* (flotilla leader), *Active*, *Velox*, *Vidette*, *Vortigern*, *Wishart* and *Wrestler* were all used to support Force H operations.

Other destroyers were temporarily seconded to Force H if available, including *Gallant*, *Greyhound*, *Griffin* and *Hotspur*.


Core Force Commanders
Hood Capt. Glennie
Renown Capt. Simeon (Capt. McGrigor from Jan 1941)
Nelson Capt. Troubridge
Malaya Capt. Coppinger
Ark Royal Capt. Holland (Capt. Maund from March 1941)
Sheffield Capt. Larcom
Hermione Capt. Oliver
Renown (flag, battlecruiser)
Sheffield (light cruiser)
Ark Royal (fleet aircraft carrier)
Hermione (AA cruiser)
8th Destroyer Flotilla
19th Destroyer Flotilla
8th DF Commanders
Faulknor Capt. De Salis
Forester Lt. Cdr. Tancock
Foresight Cdr. Lambert (Cdr. Salter from Jan 1941)
Firedrake Lt. Cdr. Norris
Fortune Cdr. Gibbs (Lt. Cdr. Sinclair from Nov 1940, Lt. Cdr. Pankhurst from Oct 1941)
Fearless Cdr. Black (Cdr. Pugsley from Dec 1940)
Fury Cdr. Robinson
Foxhound Cdr. Peters
19th DF Commanders
Laforey Capt. Hutton
Lightning Cdr. Stewart
Lance Lt. Cdr. Northcott
Lively Lt. Cdr. Husse

PERIOD OF SERVICE IN FORCE H – WARSHIPS OF CRUISER SIZE OF

	1940							1941								
	June	July	Aug	Sept	Oct	Nov	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	June	July	Aug	Sept
BC *Hood*																
BC *Renown*																
BB *Resolution*																

BB *Valiant*																
BB *Malaya*																
BB *Nelson*																
BB *Rodney*																
CV *Argus*																
CV *Ark Royal*																
CV *Eagle*																
CV *Furious*																
CV *Victorious*																
CA *Berwick*																
CL *Delhi*																
CL *Despatch*																
CL *Enterprise*																
CL *Arethusa*																
CL *Sheffield*																
CL *Fiji*																
AA *CL Hermione*																

Meanwhile, Somerville in *Renown*, escorted by three destroyers, put to sea to intercept a Vichy French force of three cruisers and three destroyers, which had passed through the Strait, bound for Casablanca. When the French force couldn't be found, Somerville returned to Gibraltar. It was there that he learned that Operation *Menace* had begun. The landing on 23 September was abandoned due to heavy fog and equally heavy resistance, and an attack on *Richelieu* by *Ark Royal*'s Swordfish the following day achieved nothing, as did a naval bombardment, while *Barham* received four hits from coastal batteries. On 25 September, Vichy French aircraft launched a retaliatory raid on Gibraltar, forcing

Renown to put to sea to avoid being caught in the harbour. Twelve aircraft were shot down, but both damage to the port and casualties were minimal.

In late September, *Renown* put to sea again, following reports *Richelieu* was on her way to a French Atlantic port. When this proved false, Somerville's flagship was used to coordinate a search for a German landing force carried in Vichy French merchantmen, reportedly heading to the Azores. This too proved to be a false alarm, although *Sheffield* was sent to patrol off the French Biscay ports, just in case. *Renown* returned to Gibraltar on 4 October, just in time to respond to another report that the Vichy French fleet in Toulon was preparing to put to sea. Once again this proved to be incorrect, although *Renown* was kept busy leading a search for five Vichy French destroyers spotted in the Mediterranean, bound for Casablanca. In the end this sighting also proved to be a mistake.

This succession of alarms interfered with Somerville's larger plans, as did the Admiralty's insistence that Force H play a part in Operation *Ration*. This was an attempt to blockade Vichy French ports. From November 1940, Somerville had to send ships to patrol the Strait of Gibraltar, and the French Biscay ports. On 22 November, for example, the light cruiser *Despatch* and two destroyers were posted in the Strait, just as Somerville was preparing to complete a 'Club Run' mission, while preparing to counter an Italian fleet sortie into the Western Mediterranean. Still, the *Ration* patrol returned to Gibraltar with a Vichy French prize, a merchantman captured while trying to run through the Strait under cover of darkness.

In early January, the AA cruiser *Bonaventure* and five destroyers were sent to intercept a small French convoy passing through the Strait into the Mediterranean. The four-ship convoy was duly captured off Oran and sent back to Gibraltar as prizes. Shots were fired though, when a British boarding party was resisted, and in the fracas two civilians were killed, one of them a small girl. Afterwards, Somerville changed his rules of engagement with the French, to avoid further incidents of this kind. On 29 March, *Sheffield* and four destroyers put to sea on a similar mission, to intercept another four-ship Vichy French convoy sailing from Casablanca to Oran. It was intercepted off Oran, but *Sheffield* was engaged by French onshore batteries and was forced to pull back out of range. As the British force returned to Gibraltar, it was unsuccessfully bombed by Vichy French aircraft.

These Operation *Ration* encounters show just how muddled this policy was. Somerville's men had no clear guidelines, apart from searching for ships on the high seas, for proof they were trading with the enemy or planning to enter an enemy port. As Force H was based in Gibraltar it was well placed for these blockade missions, but Somerville didn't really have the ships and men to spare

for them. It diverted elements of his force from their primary mission – the containing of the Italian fleet in the Western Mediterranean. By the spring of 1941 though, the Admiralty had decided that where possible it would rely on other naval units and search aircraft to carry out Operation *Ration*, and while Somerville would be called on when needed, for the most part he would be spared further operations against the Vichy French.

White and Collar

On 11 November 1940, Swordfish operating from the carrier HMS *Illustrious* launched a daring night-time attack on the Italian naval base at Taranto in Apulia. That night, the *Regia Marina* lost half of its capital ships. So, it was a markedly reduced Italian naval unit that put to sea a few days later, to intercept a Club Run. By then Somerville had transferred his flag back to *Renown*, and was accompanied by *Ark Royal*, the light carrier *Argus*, the cruisers *Sheffield* and *Despatch* and eight destroyers.

Early on 15 November Somerville put to sea, to carry out what at first appeared to be a regular Club Run mission, codenamed Operation *White*. The intention was to steam to a flying-off position to the south of Sardinia, and from there to launch 14 aircraft – 12 RAF Hurricanes and two FAA Skuas, which would then fly on to Malta, to reinforce the island's air defences. The *Supermarina* (Italian naval high command) learned of their departure that morning, and Adm. Campioni sailed from Naples with the battleships *Vittorio Veneto* and *Giulio Cesare* and a destroyer escort and rendezvoused with a two-cruiser force sailing from Messina in Sicily. Campioni's intent was to lie in wait for Somerville to the south-west of Sardinia. However, Somerville had been warned by naval intelligence that Campioni had put to sea and guessed what his Italian opponent was planning.

Part of Force H's cruiser screen during the battle of Spartiavento, on 27 November 1940. Taken from HMS *Sheffield*, at around 1215hrs, looking east, this shows the Town-class cruisers HMS *Southampton*, HMS *Newcastle* and HMS *Manchester*, heading north in a ragged line in pursuit of the Italian cruisers.

Naturally, Somerville was keen to fly off the aircraft as soon as practicable. At dawn on 17 November, the aircraft were launched, 400 miles from Malta. The first wave of six Hurricanes and a Skua were met by a Sunderland flying boat over The Narrows, to the south-west of Sicily, and guided to Malta. An unexpected headwind made progress hard, and two Hurricanes ran out of fuel and had to ditch, with one pilot being lost. The remaining five aircraft though, reached Malta. The second wave failed to meet their guiding aircraft off Sicily, and got lost in the mist. All six Hurricanes were lost, while the Skua was shot down over Sicily and its crew taken prisoner. Operation *White* then, was costly, and only partially successful. This was largely due to the presence of Campioni's fleet, which had forced Somerville to fly off the aircraft further from Malta than he would have liked.

The light cruisers HMS *Sheffield* and HMS *Manchester*, with the heavy cruiser HMS *Berwick* in the distance, pursuing and engaging Italian cruisers at the battle of Spartiavento (or Capo Tuelada), 27

November 1940. Although the engagement was inconclusive, Somerville's aggressive stance was both risky and effective.

Force H returned to Gibraltar on 19 November and its ships were refuelled, ready for its next mission, Operation *Collar*. This involved safeguarding the passage of three troopships and two light cruisers through the Western Mediterranean to Alexandria. This convoy was escorted by the Force H ships from the previous operation, reinforced by the light cruisers of Force F, *Manchester* and *Southampton*, both of which were laden with troops. Somerville left Gibraltar on 25 November, with orders to rendezvous with Force D, despatched from Adm. Cunningham's Mediterranean Fleet to the south of Sardinia. This was made up of the old battleship *Ramillies*, three cruisers and five destroyers.

On the morning of 27 November, Force H, Force F and the convoy were spotted by an Italian float plane, 20 miles north of Cap de Fer on the Algerian coast. As the aircraft was of the kind flown from Italian warships, Somerville suspected Campioni was close by. Sure enough, shortly before 1000hrs a Swordfish from *Ark Royal* spotted Campioni's fleet of two battleships, six cruisers and seven destroyers 120 miles to the north-east of the convoy, near Cape Spartiavento on the south-eastern tip of Sardinia. Somerville was outgunned and outnumbered, so he ordered the carrier to prepare to launch a strike, while ordering the convoy to alter course slightly towards the Algerian coast. Meanwhile, leaving behind two destroyers to protect *Ark Royal*, Somerville's *Renown* altered course towards the east-north-east, to make contact with Force D, which was then about 80 miles from him.

It also meant that Somerville's flagship was positioned between the convoy and the enemy. Meanwhile, V. Adm. Holland's Force F left the convoy and surged forward to catch up with Somerville. Everything now depended on what Campioni would do, and when Force D and Force H could join forces. For his part, on receiving the sighting report from the float plane, Campioni increased speed to reach Somerville before the British admiral could be reinforced. In fact, he had already missed his chance. Force H and Force D had rendezvoused at 1140hrs. *Ramillies* and five destroyers joined *Renown*, while Force D's cruisers *Berwick* and *Newcastle* joined Holland's Force F, which was now accompanied by *Sheffield*. The remaining Force D cruiser, *Coventry*, headed off to reinforce the convoy, which was only protected by the cruiser *Despatch* and three destroyers.

At 1152hrs, Campioni learned from a float plane that Somerville was just over the horizon to the south. His own force had become scattered, his two cruiser divisions were off to the south-west, looking for the enemy. Campioni ordered

them to close with the flagship, so his fleet was formed up ready for battle. For his part Somerville was preceded by Holland's cruisers, strung out in a search line, while *Ark Royal* was further astern, out of harm's way. At 1215hrs, Holland spotted funnel smoke on the northern horizon and told Somerville, who ordered his destroyers to prepare to launch a torpedo attack.

When it came at 1220hrs, the first clash was between R. Adm. Iachino's Cruiser Division and Holland's force, when the Italians opened fire at a range of 12 miles. Two minutes later, *Berwick* took an 8in shell hit to 'Y' turret. Holland's five cruisers returned fire, and at 1224hrs *Renown* and *Ramillies* came within range, and joined in with their forward 15in guns. Wisely, Iachino turned away towards Campioni's battleships, ten miles away to the north-east. The second Italian cruiser division turned away too, but it headed north, which meant the two Italian cruiser formations gradually pulled away from each other. Somerville and Holland pursued Iachino, while Campioni also turned towards his beleaguered cruisers. In the chase that followed, the old battleship *Ramillies* fell astern of the others, but the rest of the British force fought a brisk running battle with the Italians, as both groups of ships headed towards the north-east.

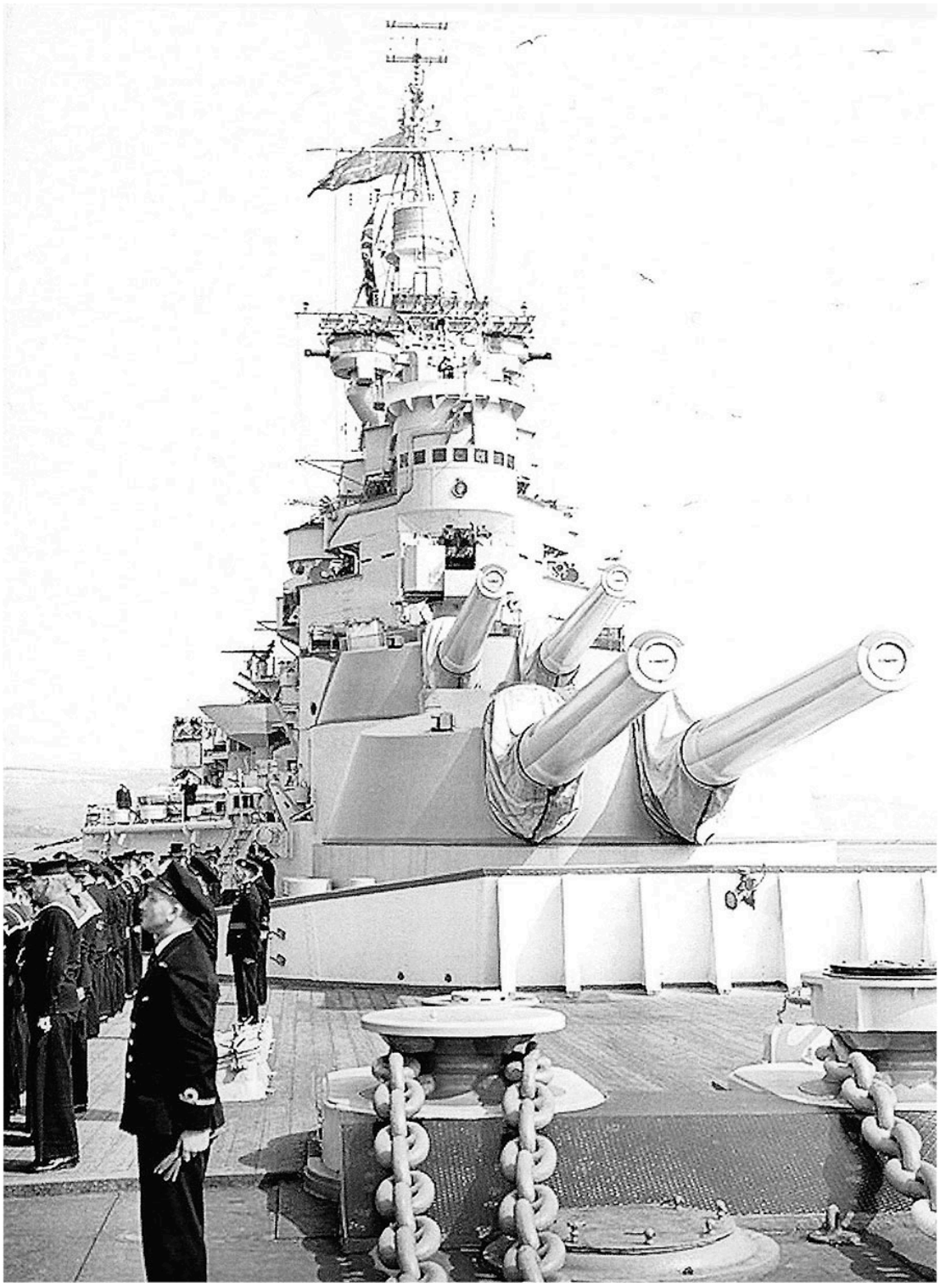
Neither side's fire was particularly accurate, but at 1235hrs *Berwick* was hit again. Five minutes later, the long-awaited air strike from *Ark Royal* located Campioni's flagship *Vittorio Veneto*, and the ten Swordfish launched a torpedo attack. The Italian battleship, however, seemed to lead a charmed life and dodged all ten torpedoes. None of the Swordfish were hit either. At 1300hrs, *Vittorio Veneto* opened fire on Holland's cruisers, at a range of 16 miles. Holland opened the range, and after ten minutes the battleship ceased fire and turned for home. Somerville could have pursued, but his priority was the convoy, far to the south. So, he too broke off the action.

During the afternoon, both sides launched air attacks on the enemy. Another torpedo strike by nine Swordfish failed to hit *Vittorio Veneto*, while ten Italian SM.79 bombers attacked *Ark Royal* without achieving any hits. The battle of Cape Spartiavento was more of a skirmish than anything else, but Somerville had got what he wanted – the convoy reached Alexandria safely, carrying an armoured brigade which Britain's Western Desert Force needed to launch Operation *Compass*, its offensive against the Italian army which, over the winter, drove it back almost 500 miles.

Genoa

In early 1941 British intelligence reports suggested that two Italian battleships and a cruiser damaged at Taranto were being repaired in Genoa. So, Operation *Result* was planned to neutralize the ships by bombarding the dockyard. The operation was cancelled, but another one, Operation *Grog*, was scheduled to take place in early February. On 6 February, Force H sailed from Gibraltar, with Somerville in *Renown* accompanied by the battleship *Malaya*, as well as *Ark Royal*, *Sheffield* and ten destroyers. Two days later, as Force H was passing the Balearic Islands, a Combat Air Patrol (CAP) screen of Fulmar fighters was spotted by an Italian reconnaissance plane, and the *Supermarina* ordered Adm. Iachino, who had replaced Campioni as commander of the Italian battlefleet, to intercept Force H. Late on 8 February, Iachino left La Spezia with three battleships, three cruisers and ten destroyers.

Both naval groups passed within 50 miles of each other in the night, and at dawn on 9 February, *Ark Royal* launched air strikes against Leghorn and La Spezia. Afterwards, all but one of the aircraft returned safely. Then, at 0714hrs, Somerville's two capital ships began their bombardment of Genoa, from a position ten miles off port. This 15in bombardment was guided by spotter planes, and caused considerable damage, although the battleship *Caio Duilio*, the only one in port, wasn't hit. After 30 minutes, Somerville ended the attack and turned south to rendezvous with *Ark Royal*. By then the carrier had recovered its aircraft, which had been laying mines off La Spezia and bombing a refinery at Leghorn. By 1030hrs, Force H was on its way home.



Although the battlecruiser HMS *Renown* lacked the firepower and protection to take on a modern battleship such as *Bismarck* or the Italian Littorio class, the ship's six 15in guns still had their uses. Somerville used them to good effect during his bombardment of Genoa on 9 February 1942. During the bombardment, the battlecruiser fired 125 shells at the port's factories and marshalling yards, causing extensive damage.

However, Iachino was still at sea and approaching Somerville from the south-west. Iachino launched float planes to locate the British, but at this stage all he found was a Vichy French convoy, to the north-west of Corsica. Undetected, Force H passed some 40 miles to the north of the Italian battlefleet, with neither side making contact. The bad weather and poor visibility that February made sighting difficult, and neither side knew the enemy was close by. By 1800hrs, when dusk ended flying operations, Force H was heading west, 20 miles off the French Riviera, while Iachino was 50 miles to the north-west, well out of range.

So, despite Iachino being well placed to intercept Force H, Iachino had been foiled by bad weather and equally bad luck. Somerville's ships arrived back in Gibraltar two days later, on 11 February. Somerville was delighted with the success of this bold raid, which also boosted morale at home at a time when Britain was being pounded by *Luftwaffe* bombing raids. Better still, Prime Minister Churchill, who had wanted to replace Somerville, now finally appreciated the merits of his naval commander in Gibraltar.

Convoy Support

One of the regular missions given to Force H by the Admiralty was the protection of convoys and naval groups that they regarded as particularly vulnerable, whether in the Atlantic or the Western Mediterranean. The first of these was Operation *Hats*, in early August 1940, which involved the passage of reinforcements for the Mediterranean Fleet from Gibraltar as far as Malta. It was one of the first of those complex operations which involved the passage of convoys from Alexandria to Malta, the transit of naval reinforcements (designated Force F) from Gibraltar to a point near Malta, and their continued passage to Alexandria as part of Cunningham's Mediterranean Fleet.

This operation was noteworthy as it was the first to involve two aircraft carriers – Force H's *Ark Royal* and Force F's *Illustrious*, working in concert with radar-equipped Force H's *Sheffield* and Force F's *Valiant* and *Coventry* to help keep Axis airborne shadowers and bombers at bay. The operation proved a success and prompted the demand for similar complex operations in the months that followed.

In early November, Somerville was ordered to send *Renown* and a destroyer screen into the Atlantic to help cover convoys under threat from a German raider, the armoured cruiser *Admiral Scheer*. Meanwhile, Somerville, temporarily flying his flag in *Ark Royal*, was busy with Operation *Coat*, the passage of more reinforcements for Cunningham. Despite an air attack on *Ark Royal*, the whole

operation proved fairly uneventful, and the reinforcements were handed over to the Mediterranean Fleet without suffering any losses.

Operation *Collar*, which led to the battle of Spartiavento, also saw the passage of both warships and fast transports through the Mediterranean, as did Operation *Hide* in late December, which saw Force H covering a westbound naval force and convoy from east to west. This had barely finished, when on Christmas Day 1940 Force H headed into the Atlantic to search for another German Atlantic raider, this time the heavy cruiser *Admiral Hipper*. In early January, Force H took part in Operation *Excess*, which was essentially *Hide* in reverse, with the transit of a fast troop convoy and naval reinforcements from Gibraltar through to Malta, Greece and Egypt. Cunningham met the convoy south of Malta, and Force H sailed for home.

HMS *Rodney*, the second battleship of the Nelson class, briefly became Somerville's flagship after HMS *Nelson* was damaged by an Italian torpedo in September 1941, during Operation *Halberd*. On 30 October, *Rodney* narrowly avoided being mined during an attempted Italian 'human torpedo' attack in Gibraltar Bay.

One of these reinforcements was the carrier *Illustrious*. On 10 January, after the handover, the carrier was attacked by both German and Italian bombers and received several hits. Only the carrier's armoured flight deck prevented a mortal blow. The cruiser *Southampton* though, was sunk. This marked the appearance of the *Luftwaffe*'s *Fliegerkorps* X in Sicily. This German air corps, specialists in

maritime attacks, would alter the whole strategic picture in the Central Mediterranean, making further operations within air range of Sicily and Malta extremely costly. As a result, the Admiralty decided that where possible, future convoys and warships bound to or from the Eastern Mediterranean would be rerouted around Africa, and through the Red Sea and Suez Canal.

In early 1941, Force H was called on to support vulnerable Gibraltar and Sierra Leone convoys in the Atlantic, while in late May, it put to sea in response to the breakout of the German battleship *Bismarck* into the Atlantic. At first this was limited to the protection of convoys, but once in the area, Somerville was ordered to join the hunt. In the meantime, in early May, Force H was called upon to participate in Operation *Tiger*, the passage of a five-ship fast convoy through the Mediterranean, from Gibraltar to Alexandria, with much-needed equipment for the Commonwealth troops evacuated from Greece and Crete.

Somerville left Gibraltar on 5 May with *Renown*, *Ark Royal*, *Sheffield* and three destroyers, as the convoy passed through the Strait, escorted by five destroyers, and naval reinforcements for Cunningham, including the battleship *Queen Elizabeth*. The inevitable air attacks began three days later, when the convoy reached 'The Narrows' between south-western Sicily and Tunisia. However, Force H was ordered to return to base, leaving the *Tiger* convoy and Cunningham's reinforcements to continue towards Malta. These ships eventually reached Alexandria, with only one merchant ship being lost. This relatively bloodless passage was aided by the temporary absence of *Flieger*korps X.

FORCE H OFF GIBRALTAR, 30 AUGUST 1940 (overleaf)

At dawn on 29 August, V. Adm. Somerville arrived in Gibraltar aboard the battlecruiser *Renown*. Accompanying his flagship was the rest of Force H. The following morning, Friday 30 August, Force H put to sea again, together with Force F, which was made up of reinforcements for the Mediterranean Fleet. These included the aircraft carrier *Illustrious* and the battleship *Valiant*. This operation, codenamed Operation *Hats*, began when Somerville's Force H cleared Gibraltar Bay, and headed east into the Mediterranean Sea. *Hats* had several elements – the passing of these reinforcements into the Eastern Mediterranean, the passage of a convoy from Alexandria to Malta, an air strike from *Ark Royal* on Cagliari in Sardinia and another from *Illustrious* as Force F passed Rhodes. This complexity was typical of Force H's Mediterranean sorties.

While Force F steamed through the Strait of Gibraltar further to the south, Force H passed close to the Rock of Gibraltar as it headed east. Somerville's flagship HMS *Renown* led the way, followed by the carrier HMS *Ark Royal* and the light cruiser HMS *Sheffield*. Until out of sight of the Rock, Somerville ordered that the carrier's aircraft remain in their hangars. Protecting these larger warships were a screen of eight destroyers, ranged ahead, astern and on the flanks of Force H. Three of them, HMS *Fortune*, HMS *Fury* and HMS *Foresight*, can be seen here, on the port beam of *Ark Royal* – the most precious warship in the force. Operation *Hats* was concluded successfully on 5 September.

Acting V. Adm. Edward Syfret, a South African-born gunnery officer, assumed command of Force H on 14 January 1942 and raised his flag in HMS *Malaya*. His predecessor, V. Adm. Somerville, had already departed 11 days before. Syfret oversaw the final handful of Force H operations, convoy escort and Club Run missions, before sailing from Gibraltar on 1 April to take part in Operation *Ironclad* – the conquest of Madagascar. At that point, Force H ceased to exist.

Operation *Substance* was the name given to the first proper Malta Convoy, which would make the dangerous voyage in late July 1941. Force H was duly given the task of protecting the merchantmen, which were laden with supplies, troops, equipment and munitions, bound for Malta. In Malta another convoy of seven unladen merchant ships, designated MG.1A, would make the return voyage, and so would also need Force H's protection. Fast Convoy GM.1 made up of six ships left the Clyde on 11 July and arrived in Gibraltar six days later. Operation *Substance* got under way on 21 July, when the convoy left Gibraltar and headed east into the Mediterranean. One of the convoy's ships, the troopship *Leinster*, had run aground, and so GM.1 was reduced to five merchantmen (*City of Pretoria*, *Durham*, *Melbourne Star*, *Port Chalmers* and *Syd*ney Star).

Accompanying them was Force X, commanded by R. Adm. Syfret, made up of three light cruisers, eight destroyers and escort destroyers and a fast minelayer. The cruisers were all crammed with troops. These warships were all reinforcements for the Mediterranean Fleet, while the troops were joining the 8th

Army. Syfret's warships would serve as the 'through escort' for the convoy, accompanying it all the way to Malta. Force H, which followed the convoy into the Mediterranean consisted of Somerville's flagship *Renown*, the battleship *Nelson*, the carrier *Ark Royal*, the AA cruiser *Hermione* and eight destroyers. Timing was important, as the complex plan for *Substance* involved a sortie by Cunningham's Mediterranean Fleet, which would accompany the fleet's reinforcements for the voyage from Malta to Alexandria.

All went well until the evening of 22 July, when the convoy was spotted by Italian reconnaissance planes. The following day, during the morning of 23 July, the British force experienced its first series of air attacks from Italian torpedo planes and high-flying medium bombers. Fulmars from *Ark Royal* intercepted the SM.79 torpedo-bombers, and shot one down, but were unable to prevent the attackers torpedoing the cruiser *Manchester*. Other Fulmars took on the high-flying Cant Z.1007 bombers, but they were kept at arm's length by the escorting Italian fighters. The bombs though, damaged the destroyer *Firedrake*, which had to be towed back to Gibraltar, while another destroyer, *Fearless*, was sunk in a second torpedo attack, launched by a follow-up wave of SM.79s. In all, 35 of the destroyer's crew were killed, or died later of their wounds.

Both destroyers were part of Force H, while *Manchester* was in Syfret's Force X. The cruiser limped back to Gibraltar, accompanied by the escort destroyer *Avon Vale*. It had been a rough day for Somerville, but it wasn't over yet. Two more air attacks were made in the afternoon and early evening, as the convoy steamed east between the Tunisian coast and the Skerki Bank, an area of relatively shallow water to the west of Sicily. The attacking planes though, didn't press home their attack as aggressively as before, and once again the Fulmars from *Ark Royal* successfully broke up the waves of Italian aircraft. Still, it had been a costly day for the carrier, losing four Fulmars in the air battles fought over the convoy. Without air cover, however, the ship losses would have been higher.

At dusk, when the convoy was abreast of the Skerki Bank, Somerville detached Force H from the convoy, and headed back to Gibraltar. It was up to Syfret and Cunningham to ensure the convoy reached Malta. The attacks continued as the convoy passed through The Narrows between Tunisia's Cape Bon and the south-west tip of Sicily, before embarking on the final leg towards Malta. That night, at 0250hrs the SS *Sydney Star* was torpedoed by Italian motor torpedo boats, and dawn brought another air attack. By then though, the convoy was within range of British fighters based in Malta. A little after noon, the six merchant ships of Convoy GM.1 made it safely into Malta's Grand Harbour.

As for the return convoy, MG.1, its seven unescorted fast merchant ships contacted Force H off the Skerki Bank during the night of 23/24 July, and

Somerville's ships escorted it westwards, fighting off two determined Italian air attacks on the way. Two more Fulmars were lost, but during the operation *Ark Royal* 's fighters shot down 12 Italian aircraft. Force H and MG.1 arrived in Gibraltar on 27 July, a day behind the crippled *Ma*nchester.

FORCE H ESCORTING THE HALBERD CONVOY, 27 SEPTEMBER 1941 (overleaf)

By the autumn of 1941, the supply situation on the beleaguered island of Malta had become critical. So, that September the Admiralty ordered Force H to take part in Operation *Halberd*. This centred around a 'fast convoy' making the passage east from Gibraltar, escorted by a powerful escort of battleships, cruisers and destroyers. V. Adm. Somerville's Force H would accompany the convoy as far as the Skerki Bank, a shoal to the west of Sicily, before returning home.

The first air attacks began at 1300hrs on 27 September, carried out by Italian bombers and their fighter escort operating from Sardinia. Somerville, flying his flag in the battleship *Nelson*, covered the starboard column of vulnerable merchant ships, while *Ark Royal* and the AA cruisers *Euryalus* and *Hermione* were stationed a mile to the south. The initial wave was beaten off, but at 1330hrs six SM.79 Spartiavento torpedo-bombers launched a second attack. Meanwhile, their escorting CR.42 fighters and the Fleet Air Arm's Fulmars fought their own aerial battle overhead. One of the attackers was shot down, but the remainder split into two groups. Three SM.79s attacked *Nelson*, while the remainder targeted the convoy. The first group dropped their torpedoes 2,500yds from the battleship.

Seeing this, Capt. Troubridge turned the battleship towards the approaching torpedoes, hoping to 'comb' between their tell-tale tracks. Meanwhile, *Nelson*'s close-range AA batteries opened fire. Two of the torpedo planes were shot down, and their torpedoes were avoided. However, the third torpedo was spotted too late for Troubridge to avoid. *Nelson* was hit on the starboard side of her forecastle. Luckily, the battleship wasn't critically damaged, and managed to make it back to Malta. By way of revenge, the third SM.79 was shot down as it made its escape.

It had been a tough operation, but a successful one. This though, was in part because the bulk of *Fliegerkorps* X was in Greece, greatly reducing the potency of Axis air attacks. Operation *Substance* would serve as the template for other Malta convoy operations which would fight their way along the same route in 1942. Prime Minister Churchill personally congratulated Somerville; while in a radio statement broadcast by the BBC, Churchill said, 'This is only the latest in a long series of complicated and highly successful operations which you and Force H have been responsible.' Sure enough, Somerville's versatile naval fire brigade would continue to live up to Churchill's words.

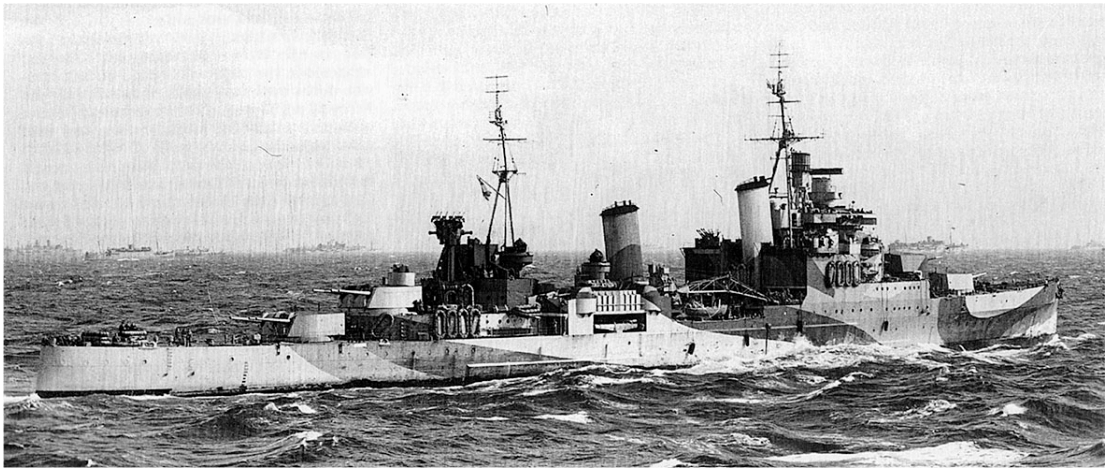
This was particularly true of Operation *Halberd*, the next eastbound Malta Convoy, which made the voyage in late September. Then, Somerville, flying his flag in *Nelson*, accompanied by *Ark Royal*, *Hermione* and five destroyers, would be joined by a second powerful naval group of two battleships (*Prince of Wales* and *Rodney*), four cruisers and 12 destroyers, while five submarines patrolled the waters off Sicily and Sardinia. In the end, *Halberd* was virtually a repeat of *Substance*. Force H and the nine-ship convoy left Gibraltar on 24 September and the first air attacks came three days later as the convoy passed south of Sardinia.

Nelson was hit by a torpedo, but the damage was minimal, and the attacks were beaten off.

A sortie by the Italian fleet was detected, and Somerville deployed his forces accordingly, but Adm. Iachino's fleet then turned back, allowing Somerville to stick to his plan and retire Force H that evening as the convoy reached Skerki Bank. The convoy and its close escort continued to Malta, and all but one of the merchantmen made it into port. It was another successful operation – the second Malta Convoy that Force H had escorted. Somerville's force had proved yet again that they could achieve whatever they were ordered.

Hunting the *Bismarck*

On Wednesday 21 May, a British reconnaissance plane sighted the brand-new German battleship *Bismarck* anchored in the Grimstadfjord near Bergen in Norway. Nearby was her consort the heavy cruiser *Prinz Eugen*. An RAF bombing raid was scheduled, but by then the German warships had sailed. Fearing *Bismarck* was planning to break out into the Atlantic, Adm. Tovey, commanding the Home Fleet, deployed his ships across the Germans' path, sending the battlecruiser *Hood* and the battleship *Prince of Wales* to seal the Denmark Strait, between Iceland and Greenland. Cruisers covered the gap between Iceland and the Faeroes, while on Thursday evening Tovey left Scapa Flow with his flagship *King George V* and the carrier *Victorious*. Late in the evening of 23 May, a pair of British cruisers sighted the two German ships as they entered the northern end of the Denmark Strait. Tovey set a course to intercept, but the initial clash would be between the German ships and V. Adm. Holland's flagship *Hood* and the newly commissioned battleship *Prince* of Wales.



HMS *Sheffield*, known as the 'Shiny Sheff' by her crew, pictured escorting 'Tiger convoy' through the Western Mediterranean in May 1940. Three weeks later, Capt. Larcom of *Sheffield* found himself in the Atlantic, shadowing the German battleship *Bismarck* using the cruiser's Type 79Y radar.

Half a year before, Holland had commanded Somerville's cruisers at Spartiavento. Now, he faced Germany's most modern battleship. The battle of the Denmark Strait began at 0552hrs, when Holland's ships opened fire. When it ended 13 minutes later, *Hood* had been sunk, and Holland and all but three of the battlecruiser's crew, and *Prince of Wales* had been disabled and forced to break off the action. Now, nothing could stop *Bismarck* from entering the Atlantic and falling on the transatlantic convoys. The German battleship though, wasn't completely unscathed. Three hits from *Prince of Wales* had caused the ship to leak fuel, so the fleet commander, V. Adm. Lütjens, decided to postpone the operation, and put in to a French Atlantic port for repairs.

Tovey tried but failed to catch up with Lütjens, and an air strike from *Victorious* achieved nothing. That night, Lütjens detached *Prinz Eugen*, then evaded the cruisers shadowing *Bismarck*, and escaped. For the British Home Fleet, dawn revealed an empty sea, and *Bismarck* was nowhere to be found. Fortuitously though, early on 25 May Lütjens broke radio silence to inform his superiors of his intentions. Thanks to radio direction finders, Tovey now had a rough idea where *Bismarck* might be. Still, it wasn't until 1030hrs on Monday 26 May that the German battleship was sighted by a British flying boat, to the south-west of Ireland. Tovey had detached *Victorious* and *Prince of Wales* to refuel, and his remaining capital ships *King George V* and *Repulse* were too far west to catch *Bismarck*. The only hope was that somehow, Somerville's Force H could catch the German battleship.

Force H had scattered from Gibraltar on 24 May, to cover Convoy WS.8B, which contained priceless troopships. The following morning, after the loss of *Hood*, the Admiralty put Somerville on notice to steam north instead, to assist Tovey. By that afternoon, Somerville was ordered to help in the hunt. Poor weather delayed progress slightly, as *Renown*, *Ark Royal* and *Sheffield* were 'taking it green' – with waves crashing over their bows. Somerville ordered his five accompanying destroyers to return to Gibraltar. At 1030hrs on Monday morning, when *Bismarck* was sighted, Force H was 112 miles to the south-east. This made it the only British force which had any chance of intercepting *Bismarck* before the German battleship reached a French port. By noon, Somerville was to the north of *Bismarck*, and while *Renown* was too lightly armed and protected to take on *Bismarck*, *Ark Royal* 's Swordfish might be able to achieve something.

The freshly commissioned fleet carrier HMS *Victorious* had a baptism of fire in the hunt for the *Bismarck*. In the following month, in mid-June 1941, the Illustrious-class carrier was attached to Force H for Operation *Tracer*, an ambitious Club Run that saw 47 Hurricanes sent to Malta from *Ark Royal* and *Victorious*. All but two of them arrived safely.

So, at 1515hrs 15 torpedo-armed Swordfish took off, and flew towards *Bismarck*, 60 miles to the south-west. At the time, the German battleship was being shadowed by *Sheffield* using the cruiser's radar. Unfortunately, nobody told the airmen, who, on sighting a ship when they emerged through the clouds, began attacking the wrong ship. Fortunately, Capt. Larcom handled his cruiser with great skill, and avoided the first of the torpedoes, while his crew fired warning flares, which belatedly led to the air strike being aborted. On flying off, one airman signalled the cruiser, saying 'Sorry for the kipper', the slang for a torpedo. The apology did little to assuage Larcom and his crew.

When the Swordfish returned to *Ark Royal* the aircraft were rearmed and refuelled. Somerville thought he might just have a second chance to launch a strike before dark. Meanwhile, Somerville altered course, to place *Ark Royal*

closer to *Bismarck*, which was still being shadowed by *Sheffield*. At 1910hrs a second strike took off, led by Lt Cdr Cooke. This time the 15 Swordfish headed directly for *Sheffield*, which guided them towards *Bismarck* through thick cloud. At 2040hrs the strike split into five groups, each of which approached *Bismarck* from a slightly different direction.

The first of these piecemeal attacks went in at 2047hrs, followed by the rest, attacking simultaneously from port and starboard. The battleship's AA fire was intense and accurate, but amazingly none of the biplanes were shot down. At least one torpedo was seen to strike the battleship amidships, but it seemed to achieve nothing. Then, at 2105hrs, during the last of the attacks, a single 18in torpedo struck the battleship's stern. Again though, no damage seemed to have been done, and the Swordfish returned to *Ark Royal*. There, despite some damage, all the aircraft landed successfully.

By then though, it had become clear that that final torpedo had damaged the battleship. At 2130hrs, *Sheffield* reported that *Bismarck* was steering erratically. Unbeknown to the British, the torpedo detonation had jammed the ship's rudders and damaged her steering gear. The battleship began turning to port in lazy circles, and it soon became clear that *Bismarck* was unable to maintain a course towards the French coast. In what was regarded as a thousand to one chance, the torpedo from *Ark Royal* 's Swordfish had crippled *Bismarck*, which in turn allowed Tovey to overhaul his prey.

After an eventful night, when Capt. Vian's destroyers attacked *Bismarck* with torpedoes, and the German damage-control teams unsuccessfully tried to repair their ship, Tovey sighted *Bismarck* soon after dawn. At 0847hrs on 27 May, the battleships *King George V* and *Rodney* opened fire, at a range of just under 12 miles. *Bismarck* fired back, but the inability to steer a straight course made gunnery fire control all but impossible. Over the next 45 minutes, British shells systematically pounded *Bismarck*, knocking out the main gun turrets and igniting fires which soon raged all along the battleship's upper deck. At 1015hrs, Tovey ordered his battleships to cease fire, and they broke off the fight, as they were desperately short of fuel. It was left to the cruiser *Dorsetshire* to finish off *Bismarck* with torpedoes. By then the German crew were abandoning ship, and scuttling charges had been fired. The torpedoes, which struck *Bismarck* at 1020hrs merely hastened the ship's end. *Bismarck* finally sank at 1040hrs that morning.

There were only 114 survivors. During the final battle, a Swordfish strike had been launched from *Ark Royal*, but in the end, it was not needed. The crew of one of the aircraft reported seeing hundreds of bodies in the water, both alive and dead. British warships trying to recover survivors were forced to withdraw at speed, due to a possible U-boat sighting. By then though, Force H, which was also

low on fuel, was heading home to Gibraltar, where Somerville and his crews could expect a warm welcome for a job well done.

Club Runs

The idea behind the Club Run has already been explained. The aim was to reinforce the air garrison of Malta, by shipping fighters out to Gibraltar, then using carriers to transport them into a suitable flying-off position in the Western Mediterranean, within flying range of Malta. The first of these, Operation *Hurry*, took place in early August 1940. On 10 June, Italy declared war on both Britain and France, and Malta came under regular air attack. The island's air defences were insubstantial, so the British government decided to reinforce them. For the most part, Hawker Hurricane fighters were used. At first this involved flying them across France to French North Africa, and then on to Malta. France's surrender though, ended the use of this direct route. After that, plans were made to ship aircraft to West Africa, where they could then be flown or shipped on to Egypt by way of Nigeria and the Sudan. However, in July the Admiralty suggested shipping them directly to Malta.

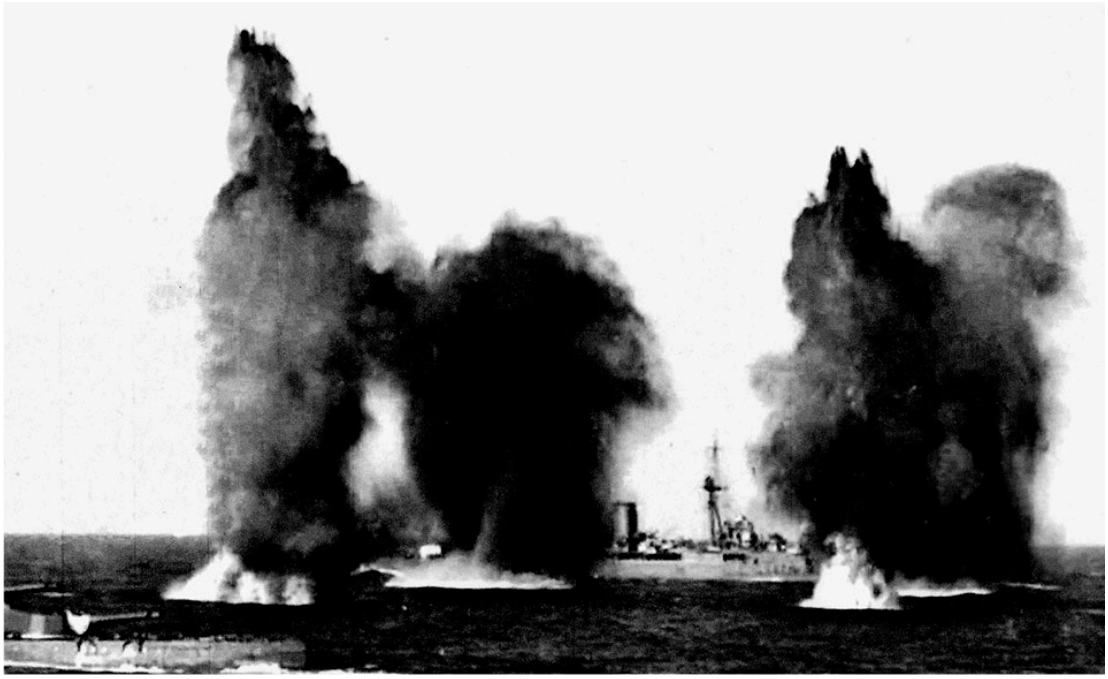
HMS *ARK ROYAL*, LAUNCHING AIR STRIKE, 26 MAY 1941 (overleaf)

At 0200hrs on 24 May, Force H left Gibraltar and headed west into the Atlantic. Somerville's flagship HMS *Renown*, accompanied by HMS *Ark Royal*, HMS *Sheffield* and six destroyers were under orders to protect outbound convoy WS.8B, which had left the Clyde two days before, bound for Freetown in Sierra Leone, in West Africa. However, the following day the Admiralty ordered V. Adm. Somerville to alter course due north, to intercept the German battleship *Bismarck*, which had broken out into the Atlantic after sinking HMS *Hood*. Bad weather slowed Force H, and forced Somerville to send his destroyers back to Gibraltar. By dawn on 26 May, it had become clear that *Bismarck* was heading for a French port, and the only warship able to stop the elusive German battleship was *Ark Royal*. By that afternoon Swordfish searching from *Ark Royal* had located *Bismarck*, and so despite the near gale blowing, Somerville ordered an air strike to be launched.

This first strike by 15 Swordfish torpedo-bombers was a fiasco – they inadvertently attacked *Sheffield*, which was following *Bismarck*, tracking the battleship using radar. Fortunately, no hits were scored before the mistake was

realized. The aircraft returned to *Ark Royal*, where they were refuelled and rearmed. Then, at 1910hrs the carrier's second strike was launched.

The image shows the launch of *Ark Royal*'s second strike against *Bismarck*, launched in the teeth of a gale. The carrier has been turned into the 50kt wind, while on the bridge, Capt. Maund has increased speed to 30kts. The flight deck officer has given the signal for the first group of three Swordfish from 818 NAS to begin their take-off run, one behind the other. Astern of them, waiting for the signal, are the remaining 12 Swordfish of the strike. Each biplane carries an 18in Mark XII aerial torpedo. Each of the three-man aircrew would hope it would be them to strike the telling blow.



Late on 9 July 1940, during an air attack on Cagliari in Sardinia, launched from *Ark Royal*, Force H came under sustained air attack by 40 Italian bombers. The attack was carried out at high altitude – over 10,000ft – and despite some near misses, no real damage was inflicted. This shows Somerville's flagship HMS *Hood*, and the stern of the battleship HMS *Valiant*, amid a flurry of bomb detonations and splashes.

The Club Run was an informal name for this ferrying operation, with Gibraltar being regarded as the clubhouse, where the operation began. The first of these runs, Operation *Hurry*, involved the ferrying of 12 Hurricane Is to Malta. The Admiralty had planned to do this aboard a merchant ship, which Force H was meant to escort. It was Somerville who suggested the modification of using a carrier and flying the aircraft off when the carrier came within range of Malta. On paper its range was around 520 nautical miles, or 600 land miles, in ideal flying conditions. So, given an adequate safety margin, the launching-off point for the first Club Run was established at around 400 nautical miles from Malta. That meant roughly along the longitude of 7° 30' East, some 50 miles to the south-west of Sardinia. Expected flying time was around two hours.

This reduced the exposure of the carrier and its protective screen to air attacks from Sardinia, Sicily, Pantellaria or even Vichy French Tunisia. So, Operation *Hurry* served as the test run with the small carrier *Argus* embarking 12 Hurricane Is in the Clyde on 23 July, before sailing to Gibraltar. Two FAA Skuas would be used to guide the fighters to Malta, each one leading a wave of six aircraft. Each wave would be met by a Sunderland flying boat to the south-west of Sicily, which would then help guide the other aircraft to Malta. In addition, two more

Sunderlands laden with spares and ground crew were flown from Britain to Gibraltar, and then on to Malta.

Operation *Hurry* was planned and executed by Somerville and his staff on board his flagship *Hood*. By way of distraction, in a side enterprise codenamed Operation *Crush*, *Ark Royal* would launch an air raid on Cagliari in Sardinia, while Operation *Spark* involved the old cruiser *Enterprise* acting as a decoy, transmitting radio messages from the north of Minorca, to confuse the Italians. In the end, the whole operation worked smoothly, and on 2 August all the Hurricanes reached Malta's Luc airfield, although one of them crashed on landing. As a result, Operation *Hurry* would serve as a model for subsequent Club Runs, the first of which, Operation *White*, took place in mid-November, again ferrying 12 Hurricanes.

After that there was a lull, as Force H was kept busy elsewhere, but in April 1941 Operation *Winch* saw the flying-off of 12 more Hurricanes, followed three weeks later by the more ambitious Operation *Salient*, which saw 23 Hurricanes flown off. Club Runs, by then, were becoming something of a routine operation for Force H. Each time, Somerville's flagship was present, and the carriers were protected where possible by AA cruisers, usually *Hermione*, and a screen of destroyers. These operations continued until the disbandment of Force H in the spring of 1942. While most Club Runs went smoothly, the odd aircraft was sometimes lost due to navigational or mechanical error, but very occasionally the operation encountered more serious problems.

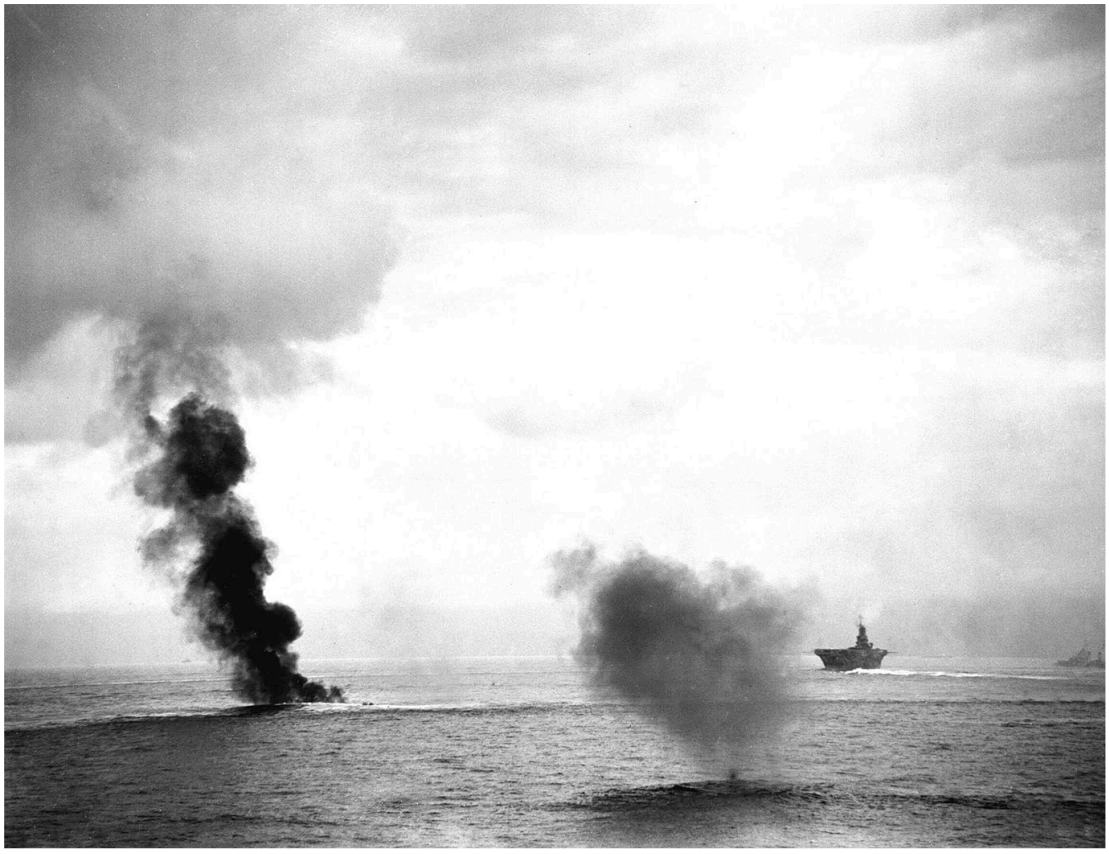
In June 1941, shortly after the *Bismarck* operation, HMS *Sheffield* was sent home for a refit. In the cruiser's place, Somerville was given the new Dido-class AA light cruiser HMS *Hermione*. A dedicated AA ship, with ten 5.25in AA guns and excellent air search and fire control radar, *Hermione* would prove an extremely useful addition to Force H.

Operation *White* has already been discussed, where the flying-off was conducted to the west of its scheduled point, owing to the approach of the Italian battlefleet. As a result, many of the aircraft ran out of fuel, with one Skua being shot down. In Operation *Winch*, the Skuas sent up as protection were also forced to ditch short of the carrier on their return flight. Operation *Spotter I*, scheduled for early March 1942, was cancelled due to fuel problems in the Spitfires. However, this was fixed, and the fighters flew off five days later, in *Spotter II*. All in all, 369 Hurricanes and Spitfires were flown off in Club Runs, and of these all but 17 Hurricanes reached Malta safely, a success rate of over 95 per cent. Although the fighter attrition rate in Malta was horrendous, either through losses on the ground during bombing raids or in air combat, without Force H's Club Runs, Malta would have been left completely defenceless.

These Club Runs almost never resulted in the loss or damage of Somerville's warships. The exception came in November 1941 during Operation *Perpetual*. After flying off 24 Hurricanes on 12 November, while *Argus* launched another 13 fighters, *Ark Royal* set a course for Gibraltar. The following day, at 1540hrs, as *Ark Royal* was nearing Gibraltar, the sonar team aboard the escorting destroyer *Legion* detected an echo. Less than a minute later a torpedo struck *Ark Royal* amidships on the starboard side, below the island. Aircraft ranged on deck were thrown about and damaged, but only one crewman was killed in the explosion. It had punched a huge rent in the carrier's starboard side, over 100ft long. *Ark Royal* began listing, as the starboard boiler room flooded.

Capt. Maund stopped the ship, as damage-control parties tried to counter the flooding. Somerville was nearby in his temporary flagship, the battleship *Malaya*. After reinforcing the carrier's damage-control parties he continued at speed to Gibraltar, to organize salvage efforts. Meanwhile, the destroyer *Laforey* came alongside *Ark Royal* to add her pumps and men to the rescue efforts. At 2000hrs the tug *Thames* arrived from Gibraltar and rigged a towing cable. By then though, the water was rising inside the carrier, and the list was increasing. The slow business of towing the crippled, sinking carrier continued through the night, but at 0400hrs on 14 November, Capt. Maund was forced to give the order to abandon ship. The carrier's crew was taken aboard the destroyer *Legion*, and taken to Gibraltar. At 0629hrs that morning, *Ark Royal* capsized and sank, 30 miles east of

Gibraltar. The seaman killed in the initial explosion was the carrier's only casualty.



HMS *Ark Royal* under attack from high-flying Italian bombers during Operation *Halberd*, late September 1941. Although the carrier was undamaged, several of its Fulmars were lost in air battles in defence of the convoy, or from 'friendly fire'. The smoke on the left of the photograph, taken from HMS *Hermione*, comes from an Italian SM.79 bomber, which had just crashed into the sea. On the far right is the AA cruiser HMS *Euryalus*.

The carrier's loss was a grievous blow to Force H, as for the past year and a half *Ark Royal* had served as the main offensive arm of Somerville's command. The culprit, it turned out, was KptLt Guggenberger, the commander of the Type VIIC U-boat U-81. The U-boat was one of several which had been sent into the Mediterranean and had just passed through the Strait on the night of 11/12 November. Just 36 hours later, Guggenberger came across *Ark Royal*, having been warned of the presence of Force H after its sighting by an Italian reconnaissance plane. Having dodged the destroyer screen, Guggenberger fired four torpedoes at *Malaya*, at a range of 3,000m. Six minutes later, one of the torpedoes hit a target – not the battleship, but *Ark Royal*, following astern, which had just turned into the

southerly wind to launch and recover aircraft. By accident then, Guggenberger had hit a much more important target than Somerville's temporary flagship.

CLUB RUNS, 1940–42					
DATE	**OPERATION**	**CARRIERS INVOLVED**	**AIRCRAFT FLOWN-OFF**	**AIRCRAFT LOST**	**COMMENTS**
2 August 1940	*Hurry*	*Argus*	12 Hurricane Is	-	
17 November	*White*	*Argus*	12 Hurricane Is 3 Skuas	8 Hurricanes 1 Skua	
1941					
3 April	*Winch*	*Ark Royal*	12 Hurricane IIs 3 Skuas 9 Fulmars	3 Skuas	1 Hurricane I crashed on landing in Malta
27 April	*Dunlop*	*Ark Royal*	23 Hurricane Is & IIs, 3 Skuas	-	
21 May	*Splice*	*Ark Royal, Furious*	48 Hurricane IIs 5 Fulmars	2 Hurricanes	
6 June	*Rocket*	*Ark Royal, Furious*	44 Hurricane IIs	1	Aircraft returned to carrier with defects
14 June	*Tracer*	*Ark Royal, Victorious*	46 Hurricane IIs	2	2 more crashed on landing in Malta
27 June	*Railway I*	*Ark Royal*	22 Hurricane IIs	1	
30 June	*Railway II*	*Furious*	35 Hurricanes	-	
25 July	*Substance*	*Ark Royal*	6 Swordfish	-	
9 September	*Status I*	*Ark Royal*	14 Hurricane IIs	-	
13 September	*Status II*	*Ark Royal, Furious*	45 Hurricane IIs	-	
18 October	*Callboy*	*Ark Royal*	11 Albacores, 2 Swordfish	1 Swordfish	
12 November	*Perpetual*	*Argus, Ark Royal*	37 Hurricane IIs	3	Ark Royal sunk, 13 November
1942					

7 March	*Spotter II*	*Argus, Eagle*	15 Spitfires	-	Spotter I aborted a week before
21 March	*Picket I*	*Eagle*	9 Spitfires	-	
29 March	*Picket I*	*Eagle*	7 Spitfires	-	

Postscript

Towards the end of 1941, Somerville wrote to the First Sea Lord, suggesting that the Admiralty might consider finding him a new appointment, and so should begin looking around for a flag officer to replace him. He also argued that in the aftermath of the loss of *Ark Royal*, its last original member, Force H might be more effectively deployed somewhere else. So, on 3 January 1942, Somerville hauled down his flag in *Nelson* and took passage home aboard *Hermione*. After a month's well-earned leave, which he spent with his wife Mary, Somerville was given a new appointment as Commander-in-Chief, Eastern Fleet. He would be the ideal man to supervise its build-up, ready for taking the war to the Japanese.

Hermione returned to Gibraltar in late February, accompanied by well-known reinforcements – the battleship *Malaya* and the light carriers *Argus* and *Eagle*. The cruiser also carried Force H's new commander, R. Adm. E. Syfret, the skilled veteran of the *Substance* and *Halberd* Malta Convoys. He was the ideal man to follow in Somerville's wake. However, Force H only had two more missions to perform, both Club Runs. In late March, Syfret was ordered to put to sea and take his force around Africa to the Indian Ocean, to take part in Operation *Ironclad*, the conquest of the Vichy French island of Madagascar. Under his command would be his flagship *Malaya*, *Hermione* and five destroyers.

Twenty minutes after HMS *Ark Royal* was torpedoed Capt. Maund ordered all his crew who weren't involved in the damage-control effort to be transferred to the escorting destroyer HMS *Legion*, which came alongside the carrier's port side. Over the next hour 1,487 men were successfully taken off the carrier.

On sailing from Gibraltar on 1 April 1942, Force H ceased to exist. Instead it became Force F, part of the *Ironclad* invasion fleet, and in the process it lost its status as a detached squadron. There would be a need for a powerful Gibraltar-based naval force in the future, and Syfret would again be called on to fight convoys through from Gibraltar to Malta. These operations though, would no longer be conducted as an independent entity like Force H, but as part of a much larger fleet. Somerville's celebrated Force H, however, remained an inspiration for those who shared Somerville's determination that these lifeline convoys must get through.

ANALYSIS

Force H was created to fill a need. It acted as a backstop, ensuring that no enemy force would be able to pass through the Strait of Gibraltar or to threaten the strategically vital British base there. Somerville's force achieved this, at least in terms of surface ships, save for a small French cruiser force that transited the Strait in late 1940, when Force H was busy elsewhere. No German surface ships were able to join forces with their Italian counterparts, or vice versa. U-boats made the transit though, but they weren't the responsibility of Force H. Stopping them was the job of FOCNAS and his Gibraltar-based command. However, whenever they were available, Force H's destroyers helped reinforce the North Atlantic Station's destroyers, to patrol the Strait. Several U-boats were sunk during the attempted transit. So, in this respect Force H fulfilled its primary mission, of denying the Strait to the enemy.

The ability to intervene in the Atlantic remained a key part of Somerville's remit, and he led several Atlantic sorties, protecting convoys, hunting for Germans raiders, neutralizing the Vichy French and preventing any German move to occupy the Azores, and turn the archipelago into an advanced base in the U-boat war being fought in the Atlantic. However, Force H's most celebrated achievement was the part it played in hunting the German battleship *Bismarck*. Against all odds, an air strike from *Ark Royal* managed to cripple Germany's most modern battleship, which in turn allowed the Home Fleet to overhaul and sink *Bismarck*. While it was clear Force H would not be able to make much of a difference in the Battle of the Atlantic, it was well placed to hunt German surface raiders, and perform other functions that only a powerful surface force could achieve, such as neutralizing the Vichy French threat.

However, it was in the Western Mediterranean that Force H was needed the most. The vacuum there created by the relocation of the Mediterranean Fleet to Alexandria, and the fall of France was filled by the timely arrival of Somerville's force. He was able to exert control over the area of sea between Gibraltar and Sardinia, which gave the Allies a few days of grace in any attempts to push convoys or naval reinforcements through the Western Mediterranean to Malta and beyond. Much like Cunningham further east, Somerville lacked the power to challenge the enemy for control of the Central Mediterranean. The need though, to enter this central arena, to bring relief and support to Malta, became increasingly important as the war in the Mediterranean went on. Force H played its own unique part in this, carrying out the Club Runs that kept RAF Malta supplied with the fighters it needed to protect the island.

At 1600hrs, around 19 minutes after HMS *Ark Royal* was struck by a torpedo fired by U-81, the flight deck of *Ark Royal* was sloping at an angle of 18°. That and the loss of power made it impossible to fly-off the embarked aircraft, including the Swordfish seen here, ranged forward. At 0610hrs the next morning, when the carrier finally capsized, all of these aircraft were lost.

The need to keep Malta supplied and strengthened led to Force H escorting convoys and naval reinforcements through the hostile waters beyond Sardinia. These seas were contested by large and powerful enemy air formations, a powerful Italian battlefleet and other threats, such as U-boats, Italian submarines, torpedo boats, as well as enemy-laid minefields. Somerville wasn't expected to solve the problem of how to keep Malta supplied, but he was duty-bound to protect the convoys and naval reinforcements which had to fight their way through to Malta from the west. The longer the siege of Malta went on, the more willing the Allies were to take risks in keeping the island supplied. It was clear Malta was a huge thorn in the Axis side, and so its survival became the dominant factor in the Mediterranean war.

Somerville's Force H protected three small fast 'MT' convoys of troopships and military supplies in the Malta run, and then in late 1941, was instrumental in the protection of two much larger Malta Convoys, in operations *Substance* and *Halberd*. These five convoy operations were extremely successful. In all, of the 26

merchant ships which took part in them, 24 of them reached Malta, despite some heavy air attacks and torpedo attack from submarines and fast motor-boats. During these last two operations it became clear that Force H had a vital role to play in these operations, but that in order for the operation to be a real success, Somerville had to work hand in hand with Adm. Cunningham's Mediterranean Fleet. This then, set the groundwork for the disbandment of Force H in 1942, to make way for a more unified command structure, with Cunningham in overall charge of operations. Force H showed what could be achieved in the Western Mediterranean by a well-trained and potent naval force. After March 1942, others would have to take up that mantle.

Somerville was not simply interested in defensive operations. Force H's audacious bombardment of Genoa proved that Somerville was acutely aware of how well the operation would be perceived at home, and so he was prepared to risk his naval force to deliver a morale booster. It also served as a warning to the Italians that he could strike at will anywhere in the Western Mediterranean. Given the disparity of naval forces, this was a bluff. It was one though, that the Italians were not willing to call. So, with minimal resources Somerville was able to exercise sea power over 700 miles of the Mediterranean. This alone was an achievement worthy of Nelson.

Force H existed as a detached squadron, answerable only to the Admiralty. In turn though, it was the Admiralty rather than Somerville that could dictate the pace and location of operations. As a result, one week Force H could be in the Mediterranean conducting Club Runs and the next it could be in the Atlantic chasing German surface raiders. Much of this was in response to strategic needs, but some was also down to political whims. In effect, Force H became a highly capable naval fire brigade, being sent wherever it was needed the most. This though, stripped Somerville of the ability to pursue a long-term plan.

That said, it was Somerville and his staff who devised the notion of the Club Run and pioneered the methods of convoy protection which would bear fruit in later Malta Convoys. In return, Force H was lionized by the free world's press, and its every exploit and success was avidly followed. For almost two years, in terms of publicity, Force H was the most famous command in the Royal Navy. Somerville and *Ark Royal* were household names, and when *The Times* described Somerville as a 'fighting admiral', the accolade ignored all of the planning, organization and training that had welded Force H into such a tightly knit and thoroughly professional fighting force.

V. Adm. Sir James Somerville was never afraid to speak his mind, even to his superiors in the Admiralty, and he frequently ‘suggested’ ways his orders could be improved upon. He earned this leeway, however, as the First Sea Lord, Admiral of the Fleet Sir Dudley Pound, had complete faith in Somerville’s abilities as a ‘fighting admiral’.

Above all though, Force H’s legacy is one of sea power. The late 19th-century American naval theorist Alfred Thayer Mahan first formulated the concept of sea power, and his ideas helped to define naval strategy in two world wars. If Mahan had been writing in 1942, he would have used Force H as an example of how a small but powerful, professional and well-led composite naval force, operating from a secure base, could exert its dominance over the seas it operated in. As a result, Somerville’s Force H was able to make regular Club Runs, providing Malta with the means to defend itself, while also protecting the passage of convoys and other warships through its territory, without any serious threat of attack from its Italian opponents.

In the early years of World War II, Force H punched well above its weight, and made its mark in two naval theatres, and against three opponents. Force H was

able to demonstrate, with sublime effectiveness, the true meaning of sea power.

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Angus Konstam is a Fellow of the Royal Historical Society and has written widely on naval history, with well over a hundred books in print. He is a former Royal Navy officer, maritime archaeologist and museum curator, who has worked in the Royal Armouries, Tower of London, and Mel Fisher Maritime Museum. Now a full-time author and historian, he lives in Orkney.

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Paul Wright has painted ships of all kinds for most of his career, specializing in steel and steam warships from the late 19th century to the present day. Paul's art has illustrated the works of Patrick O'Brian, Dudley Pope and C.S. Forester amongst others, and hangs in many corporate and private collections all over the world. A Member of the Royal Society of Marine Artists, Paul lives and works in Surrey.

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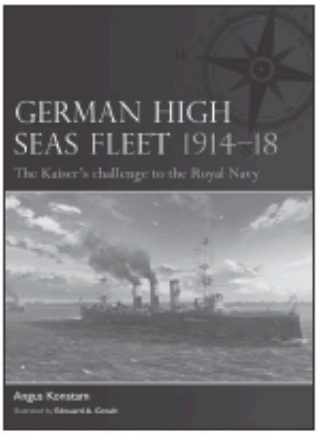

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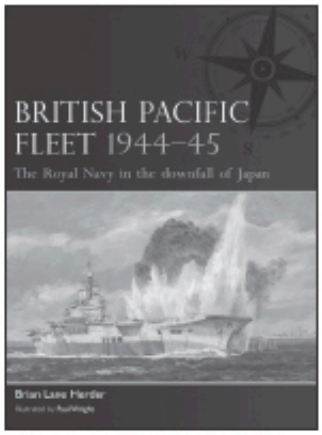

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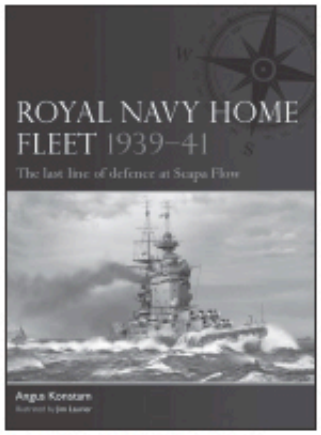

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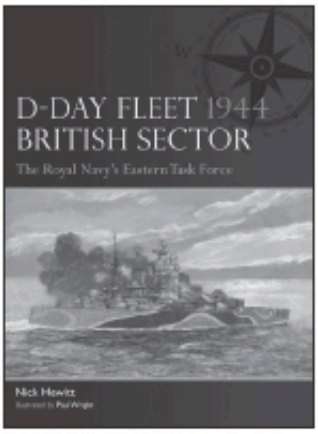

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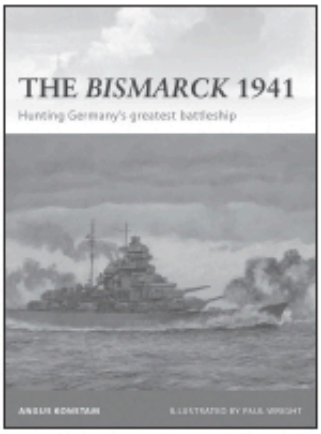

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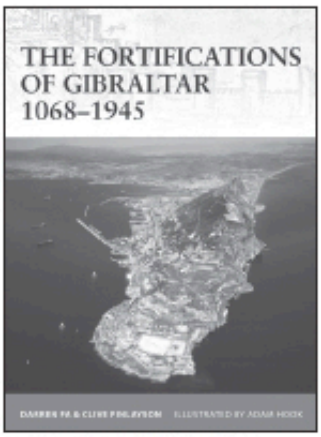

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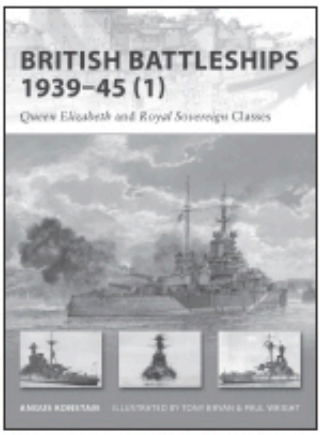

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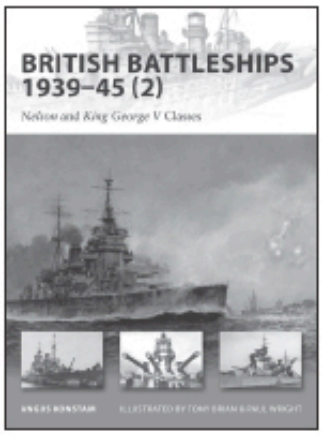

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